

ACTOR ALONE: SOLO PERFORMANCE IN NEW ZEALAND

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## Abstract

This thesis explores solo performance in New Zealand. That solo performance has been widely used in New Zealand's relatively brief theatre history is usually ascribed to the economy, manoeuvrability and adaptability of the form – common reasons for the popularity of solo performance elsewhere as well. But this thesis considers solo performance as a kind of theatre that has been suited to New Zealand in a distinctive way.

In particular, I argue that solo performance has emerged on the margins of mainstream theatre in New Zealand as a means of actively engaging with a sense of isolation that typifies the post-colonial New Zealand experience. The ability of the solo performance to move between remote rural settlements and urban centres has connected these New Zealand communities in a way that is unusual for theatre in New Zealand. Furthermore, a solo performer speaking directly to an audience about the experience of living in New Zealand allows for an intimate interaction with a traditionally stoic and laconic masculine society.

In this thesis, I make a case for three solo performances where it is possible to see, in the representation of a search for what it means to be a New Zealander, a theatrical contribution to nation-building: *The End of the Golden Weather* (1959), *Coaltown Blues* (1984) and *Michael James Manaia* (1991). However, in a subsequent chapter, I look at solo performances in New Zealand that might better be understood within global movements such as feminism and multiculturalism. I argue that this shift has depleted the power that the form once held to comment upon New Zealand identity and to assist in the search for national identity. I conclude the thesis by considering how ongoing theatre practice may be informed by the experience of solo performance in New Zealand.

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## Introduction

### Actor Alone: Solo Performance in New Zealand

In this thesis I explore solo performance in New Zealand. Solo performance has been a widely used form in New Zealand's relatively brief theatre history. Its appeal is usually put down to the practicalities of the form. That is, a solo performance is an attractive option because with only a single performer it requires less in terms of time and money. It is easily transportable and, usually, adaptable to different spaces. Solo performance is also seen as an effective way to showcase a performer's skill: a display of virtuosity that is ideal for revealing the performer's theatrical talent. In this sense, solo performance is a useful means of initiating, maintaining or solidifying a career as an actor. It has to be said that these are common reasons given for the popularity of solo performance in other cultures as well. In New Zealand, though, the appeal of the solo form seems to go beyond pragmatism.

A number of solo performances in New Zealand have experienced extraordinary longevity. There are solo performances in New Zealand that have repeatedly toured the country, sometimes for years and even decades. Many of them – *The End of the Golden Weather* (1959), *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (1978), *Coaltown Blues* (1984), *Michael James Manaia* (1991), *Ka Shue/Letters Home* (1996), *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* (1997), *Krishnan's Dairy* (1997) and, most recently, *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* (2007) – are considered significant contributions to New Zealand theatre. A few of them are referred to as 'iconic' and are seen as emblematic of a particular time in New Zealand's history. This kind of success and notoriety suggests that something in the solo form connects with audiences in New Zealand in a way that is unusual for theatre in New Zealand. My

intention in this thesis is to consider these solo performances, and others, within their socio-historical contexts to explore on what terms solo performance may be a form of theatre suited to New Zealand in a special way.

As indicated by the dates of the solo performances I have mentioned, this study covers a considerable period in relation to New Zealand theatre history. In many ways, it covers the most significant period in New Zealand theatre history. I say this because the first solo performance I mentioned is Bruce Mason's *The End of the Golden Weather*. Mason is the first New Zealand playwright to be dedicated a chapter in *New Zealand Drama* (1981), Howard McNaughton's seminal work on the history of New Zealand theatre, and *The End of the Golden Weather* is described by Peter Harcourt as "the greatest contribution to theatre yet made by any New Zealander" (Harcourt 1978, 99). Although there were many plays written and performed before *The End of the Golden Weather* in 1959 that had explored the notion of what it meant to be a New Zealander (Mason had written several himself), these plays had struggled to find an audience. *The End of the Golden Weather*, on the other hand, became a phenomenon, touring all over New Zealand, repeatedly, for over three decades.

In the recent anthology *Performing Aotearoa: New Zealand Theatre and Drama in an Age of Transition* (2007), William Peterson contributes a chapter about the solo form. He points to *The End of the Golden Weather* as the first in a tradition of "one handers" that have "served as a touchstone for an ever-expanding Kiwi identity for over four decades" (Peterson 2007, 103). Peterson suggests that Mason's reflections on the experience of Pakeha (the Maori word for European settlers, most of whom were British), initiated a type of performance that has transformed from a final option necessity to a first choice means of representing the diverse aspects of New Zealand identity, including perspectives of Maori, Asians and Pacific Islanders.

He says that the form, “once regarded as the step-child of serious drama” has gone on to take “centre stage,” reflecting the evolution of New Zealand from monocultural to bicultural and onto a multicultural society (Peterson 2007, 103). In this light, the success story of the solo form within New Zealand is attributed to the way it reflects an *inclusion* of various others within the formulations of a wider identity – to build the New Zealand identity over a longer period of time, each performance adding another identity, another perspective/layer, to the ongoing definitions of what it means to be a New Zealander.

Even though I agree that solo performance has been an extraordinary success story in New Zealand, and my own study can similarly be read as an account of this successful history, I take a different approach to that of Peterson. I propose a critical assessment of solo performance in New Zealand that challenges the notion that it has been an unmitigated success, or, to put it another way, I question on what terms the form might be considered successful as a form of theatre in New Zealand: what is meant by ‘success’ in each instance and how does that definition change over time? Whereas Peterson suggests that the success of solo performance lies in the way it has moved from a marginal form to one that is central to theatrical practice in New Zealand, reflecting the growing diversity and plurality of New Zealand’s identity, I argue that this shift has depleted the power that the form once held to reflect upon New Zealand identity and to assist in building a community and a national identity. I point to solo performances, beginning with Mason’s *The End of the Golden Weather*, in which the notion of a “Kiwi identity” or a collective, national identity appears to be uncertain and is searched for in performance by the performer. Although the solo performer may not have intended to offer such mediation – the decision to go solo being a means to the end of maintaining a theatre career – the representation of a

personal search for identity resonates at a wider collective level with a community searching for a national identity. In particular, these solo performances reflect the notion that New Zealand identity exists on the margins. They point to a hybrid identity that is in between, in a state of becoming. Perhaps, then, as a hybrid form on the margins of established ideas of theatre, solo performance is particularly suited to exploring New Zealand identity. This, I argue, explains the success and power of solo performance as a theatrical experience in New Zealand: there is a focus and vitality to the meeting between performer and audience in which the issue of a shared identity is being considered, challenged, searched for, and, possibly, discovered.

However, in the movement from last resort to first choice, from the margins of theatrical practice in New Zealand to the centre of arts festivals and theatre seasons, the solo form reveals the notion that New Zealand has successfully ‘come of age’; the margins are no longer the place to reside – New Zealand is ‘on the map’ and similar to other multicultural societies around the world. Or, another way of looking at it, the margins have become so populated with Others pointing to their otherness, that the margins begin to lose their distinctiveness, especially when so many of these Other stories involve an appeal to ‘universal’ notions of identity that suggest that everybody is, at a fundamental level, the same. In this way, the form appears much like solo performances from elsewhere, and may indeed look to mimic life elsewhere rather than looking to what is unique and *different* in New Zealand by exploring what it means to be a New Zealander with a New Zealand audience. In this sense, the audience’s identity, as a representative of a wider collective, is secure – they are asked to accept Others into that collective – which presupposes that a collective identity already exists and that *searching* for one is, therefore, no longer necessary. In this shift from solo performance representing the search for national identity to the

adding-on of individual identities to an already established collective identity – a shift that would seem to be exacerbated (or caused) by the powerful currents of global movements – the power of theatre as an immediate and vital form is diminished – if there is no longer a search for a collective identity, if everybody is included, what is the *difference* that defines New Zealand identity? How can an identity be said to exist if difference is not constantly being searched for and what is *exclusive* to New Zealand not always being discovered?

Although such an approach may be unfashionable, the search for a national identity may offer the kind of passion and difference that is constantly at threat in the moves towards global identity. I say unfashionable because the search for national identity is often associated with the nationalistic, which has connotations of the jingoistic and xenophobic, excluding Others and privileging those that already hold the power of the status quo. Yet searching for a national identity does not automatically result in a nationalistic prejudice; it may, rather, be a way of overcoming the myopia of a nationalism that is based in the notion of pre-existing and fixed identities that must be protected and defended from attack, and principally that which is said to be threatened by the ‘watering down’ effects of immigration. The search for national identity, in the way I envisage it, involves the perspective of Others outside the mainstream, whose point of view can challenge established or fixed notions of “Kiwi identity”. From this position, the margins are a place from which to question, with an audience, a collective identity. This, I argue, is the example that has been set by solo performance in New Zealand but which may have been diminished due to the growing strength of global movements that suggest that searching for a collective, national identity is unnecessary.



Therefore, I look to these kinds of solo performance as potential political interventions – forms of political theatre. Rustom Bharucha argues in *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (2000), that the national still has currency as a political tool:

At a more complex political level, I would like to highlight the necessity of not entirely abandoning the ‘national’ in one’s redefinition of the ‘cultural’. While I am not a nationalist, I am not entirely prepared to let go of the legitimacy and potentially liberating force of the ‘national’, particularly in relation to those people’s movements against globalization in Third World countries, which could be the only hope for challenging and redemocratizing the state. In short, I would like to acknowledge here my political affinities with Samir Amin’s important consideration that in an age of ‘*uneven globalization*’ (where, contrary to the liberal rhetoric of global ‘flows’, there is ‘no free movement of workers worldwide’), popular nationalist movements in the periphery are necessary ‘to save the state from capitulation to the demands of transnationalization. They alone can renationalise the state and allow it to gain control over accumulation’ (Cheah 1998, 34-35). (Bharucha 2000, 4)

Bharucha’s analysis grows from the specific geo-political context of a ‘Third World’ nation-state (India). However, it is possible to see in his reconsideration of the national a political stance that might be considered in New Zealand, where, in different ways, the process of globalization may also be seen to limit the possibility of difference and, thereby, freedom. In particular, it is possible to apply to the New Zealand situation Bharucha’s observation that, with a loss of the ‘national’, the resulting vacuum is filled by (and perhaps created by) “the market” of transnational conglomerates at the heart of the globalization ‘movement’. Taking up the periphery, the margins, is a form of resistance to the homogenizing tendency of these global movements (Bharucha 2000, 5).

My aim is to explore solo performance as a particularly effective form of theatre in New Zealand, which, I argue, is due to the way it takes up the margins to consider collective notions of identity – to seek out, with an audience, what is different and original about being a New Zealander. In this way, the thesis is not

meant to be a comprehensive history of solo performance in New Zealand; I do not intend to cover and discuss every solo performance in New Zealand history. Rather, I look to solo performances that have been particularly popular with a New Zealand audience and gained renown as examples of New Zealand theatre, asking how this reflects the changing tides of New Zealand identity and of theatre's role in representing/affecting this identity. I consider the ways in which solo performance adapts different theatrical forms and styles in an attempt to reach a local audience and to represent New Zealand identity as one forged on the margins. I explore how the changes in representing the search for national identity reflect the effectiveness of solo performance as a distinctive form of theatre in New Zealand. To begin an exploration of these shifts, I turn now to consider the socio-historical circumstances that gave rise to solo performance in New Zealand, and especially the theatrical context from which solo performance emerged.

Solo performance has emerged on the margins of the established theatre in New Zealand. The conventional idea of theatre, that is, what an audience has come to expect of 'theatre' in New Zealand, is based in the traditions of literary theatre (drama) introduced by the English colonists who began settling in New Zealand after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.<sup>1</sup> In his updated consideration of drama in *Oxford History of New Zealand Theatre in English*, McNaughton suggests that at the time of the settler's arrival, Maori had performance traditions of their own,<sup>2</sup> although these were different to the mimetic tradition that is the basis for Aristotelian

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<sup>1</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi is considered the founding document of New Zealand, signed by representatives of Queen Victoria and some of the Chiefs of Maori tribes that occupied the country before the arrival of Europeans. The Treaty was ratified by the English and, despite (or because of) considerable debates over the meaning of various clauses and concepts, remains a formative document in notions of national identity.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Royal's PhD Dissertation: *Te Whare Tapere: Towards a New Model for Maori Performance Arts* (1998), (recently republished in *Performing Aotearoa*, 2007) which refers to pre-contact Maori performance forms,

notions of Western literary theatre (1998, 322). Whereas the Maori performance forms reflected the oral traditions of that culture, the theatre to which McNaughton refers, and upon which the dominant idea of theatre in New Zealand is founded, is situated in the literary traditions of English theatre.

This approach to theatre was established in New Zealand through related sources: tours by professional theatre companies and performers from England, especially in the earlier days of the emerging New Zealand nation; the presentation of English plays by amateur groups and the ongoing proclivity towards staging plays from elsewhere in the emerging professional era of the 1970s and 1980s. As John Thomson points out in his *New Zealand Drama 1930-1980: An Illustrated History* (1984), although there is a considerable history of New Zealand plays, the most popular theatre has come from elsewhere:

Of one distortion the reader must be warned. Until recently local plays made up only a very small fraction of the drama performed in amateur and professional theatres. As the fluctuating fortunes of New Zealand drama are followed through these pages, it should not be forgotten that audiences and performers alike found the bulk of their diet in plays from overseas. That is also a part of the social history of New Zealand. (Thomson 1984, 8)

The histories supplied by McNaughton and Thomson introduce the reader to work that has emerged alongside the plays from England, surveying texts that marry farce, melodrama, expressionism, naturalism and the musical with the scenes and circumstances of New Zealand. However, what can be discerned from the histories of New Zealand theatre is that the dominant and popular idea of theatre that has been established in New Zealand is based on the imported three act play, which is performed by an ensemble cast and, most often, is presented in a naturalistic style that has the characters performing as if behind a fourth wall to which the audience is an unacknowledged observer. It is in relation to this expectation of theatre by a New Zealand audience – an expectation that continues to the present day – that an

appreciation of the success of solo performance in New Zealand can begin. I would suggest that solo performance is suited to New Zealand precisely *because* it has emerged on the margins of the established idea of theatre.

To explain this idea it is necessary to understand how solo performance has arisen from attempts by performer/playwrights to overcome a sense of cultural isolation. Anxiety over isolation lies at the very core of the New Zealand experience and is derived from multiple socio-historical sources. It is, partly, related to geography. A hangover of the settlers moving from one side of the world to the other, from the top to the bottom, is the feeling that New Zealand is a set of remote islands on the edge of the world (and precipitously so). There is a sense that New Zealand is at the end of the world, an invisible and insignificant set of islands on the way to nowhere. For example, in the introduction to his audio recording of *The End of the Golden Weather*, Bruce Mason describes New Zealand as if it is hiding in “a remote backwater in the South Pacific” (Mason 1981b). The relatively minor settlements within a diverse landscape, often rugged to the point of being uninhabitable, mean that large tracts of bush and mountains separate communities. As the country was set up with a view to agriculture, many of these settlements were developed to converge between large farms, or stations, which continue to be referred to as the ‘backbone’ of the country – more a reference to the economic value of the land than a visual allusion to the mountains that run through the centre of the country and around which many of these stations are based. Travelling through New Zealand, it is possible to understand why so much of the arts and literature of the country represents and constructs a sense of space as vast and seemingly endless.

At the same time, New Zealand art and literature often represent a culture that is strangely claustrophobic and a land that is malevolent and oppressive. Such a

paradox is the result of the values imported with English settlers and their attempts to interpret or translate the features of their new home. Migrants brought with them the puritan values of Victorian England to establish a new England; these values are woven into the fabric of New Zealand society. Quoting Frank Sargeson, Lawrence Jones points to the ingrained sense of conformity and propriety in New Zealand society, where the New Zealand writer is affected by a “large number of distortions” created by a “particular variety of Puritanism” that is “pervasively characteristic of New Zealand” (Sargeson qtd in Jones 1998, 156). Much of the arts and literature in New Zealand may be seen as attempts to break free of the isolation that such values impose. Helping or hindering such attempts at freedom is the celebration of a stoic, laconic masculinity in New Zealand society. This is perhaps the inevitable result of the male pioneer to whom, both literary and figuratively, the settlers looked to build a sense of identity. The feeling of remoteness has been exacerbated by the way a masculine ethos frowns upon the expressive, the emotive and the feminine. Within this masculine context, women play a secondary, supportive role in the formulations of identity, represented as a mass of undifferentiated housewives or ‘sheilas’ in relation to the lone male carving out an identity, a place to stand.<sup>3</sup>

It is in this context that solo performance has emerged in New Zealand. The economy, manoeuvrability and adaptability of solo performance have allowed the performer to get to the small, remote communities that typify New Zealand culture. This is something that the conventional theatre, with ensemble casts, sets, lights, costumes and so on, has struggled to do. The adaptability of the form is also useful for performing in the places where communities gather in New Zealand: small theatres,

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<sup>3</sup> For further exploration on the representation of the masculine tradition in New Zealand literature see Philips (1991), Jensen (1996) and Law, Campbell and Dolan (1999).

community halls, RSAs (the premises of the Returned Servicemen Association), pubs, schools, marae and so forth.

The desire to go to these communities in the first place reveals the need to make a connection with a wider community that is considered absent or not-quite-there. Such a feeling is perhaps typical of a post-colonial culture like New Zealand's, where a dominant settler culture is looking to establish a separate identity away from its former homeland by engaging with the local environment, including the indigenous inhabitants (who are also searching for an identity but in a different way). The desire for a post-colonial identity may be distinguished from Robert Young's notion of "colonial desire" (1995), in which the coloniser looks to shape the native Other in his own image (Robinson Crusoe and Friday being a prime example). Alternatively, the post-colonial desire of a culture of indigenous inhabitants and settlers involves a resistance to colonial desire and a reconsideration of the notions of self and Other; rather than the colonial desire to tell the native Other "you are Friday", post-colonial desire leads to the dialogue that asks: "who am I?" and "where am I?" It is in this liminal context – a dissolving colonial identity and the search for a new post-colonial identity – that a further sense of isolation takes place: there is a feeling of being adrift and alone, a feeling of incompleteness and a need to seek out others who might aid in the search for a shared identity. In this way, the decision to use the solo performance for its practical advantages indicates the desire to find a wider community and a national identity.

My consideration of post-colonial desire in the context of solo performance in New Zealand deviates from the notion of the colonial and the post-colonial as being clearly defined by dates and events such as the signing of treaties to commence and cease colonial rule and wars of independence. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins

point out in *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), rigid temporal definitions of the colonial and post-colonial fail to take into account the insidious nature of colonialism and the ambiguity that arises with attempts to move beyond it:

[Colonialism's] effects shape language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities and, increasingly, popular culture. A theory of post-colonialism must, then, respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 2)

Rather than seeing colonialism and post-colonialism as distinct entities, Gilbert and Tompkins point to ambivalent overlaps in the way theatre represents post-colonial identity: before independence day there will be work that reveals the desire for a post-colonial identity, and, following it, there are colonial hangovers so that a period may reflect both colonial and post-colonial desires. This is especially the case in a post-colonial culture such as New Zealand's that lacks a distinctive independence day as the settlers and indigenous cohabit. The ambiguity that Gilbert and Tompkins' locate in the definitions of post-colonialism leads me to consider solo performance in New Zealand as an effect or symptom of the desire for a separate post-colonial identity, a truthful reflection of the contradictions and inconsistencies that are involved in such a search. In doing so, I hope to discover the potential that may arise in the meeting between coloniser and colonised, which Homi Bhabha points to in his theory of the 'Third Space'. Bhabha says that in a "Third Space": "the transformative value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One nor the Other but something else besides" (Bhabha 1994, 25). In a post-colonial culture, this "Third Space" is governed by hybridity, where the coloniser and colonised can discover that neither position is completely dominant or dominated, that they operate in an ambiguous, unestablished state, and that they converse in ways that

confront their respective situations together without the necessity to force agreement or understanding.

At the same time, I make a distinction between active and passive forms of post-colonial desire. In *Theatre and Postcolonial Desire* (2004), Awam Amkpa extends Young's notion of colonial desire to see post-colonial desire as: "signi[fying] an act of refusal to assume the passive, static, essentialist identity of [the] 'Other'" (Amkpa 2004, 10). Whereas Amkpa associates this notion with indigenous playwrights working in post-colonial Africa, I consider this notion of refusing passivity in the context of New Zealand, where the coloniser/colonised binary is complicated. There is a settler culture that has begun to see itself as both coloniser and colonised, and an indigenous population that is divided – there are those that are searching for sovereignty away from Pakeha society and there are those that see themselves as part of a nation with Pakeha (and there are variations within these positions). In this ambiguous milieu, it is possible to see active attempts to forge a separate identity working in relation to a passive response that would allow the colonial origins of the culture to be maintained – seeing England as home and New Zealand as a New England. The maintaining of a colonial theatre may be seen as an example of the latter.

Solo performance in New Zealand has arisen, accidentally, as an active form of post-colonial desire. In acknowledging the situation of cultural isolation, solo performance has allowed the playwright/performer, through form and content, to go in search of a wider community and a national identity. From a position of seeming powerlessness, as a last resort to find an audience, the solo performance has inadvertently become an ideal way – a theatrical way – to assist in the task of nation building. At a formal level, solo performance is an exceptional way to reach an



audience: the directness of the solo form is tailor-made for speaking to an audience, making connections at a collective level for a community that is scattered wide and far. Furthermore, in the absence of other performers on stage, the solo performer tends to strike up a greater degree of intimacy with the audience. Often this means the solo performer talks directly to/with the audience as if they were familiar to each other – that there is something shared between them. This gives a sense of immediacy to the meeting – a heightened sense of togetherness.

In some ways this idea of togetherness seems a contradiction. That is, the solo performer stands apart from the audience and, more often than not, takes on roles that represent a sense of being removed or excluded from the community. The solo performer embodies the idea of isolation. However, the solo performer conveys the causes for exclusion in the stories told, and in the presence of the audience these stories offer the possibility of finding common ground. It may be that spectators also come to recognize feelings of isolation. In hearing other stories of exclusion the spectator may empathise with the performer and other spectators that are doing the same. Alternatively, it may be that the audience comes to see the difference of the performer and is asked to reconsider, not only how such differences affect the wider community to which they belong, but also their place within it. In each instance, the aloneness of the performer on stage represents the idea of isolation and offers the possibility of discovering a wider national identity – a coming-together in both form and content.

This kind of coming-together seems different to what happens in mainstream theatre. It is possible to see the conventional theatre as responding to the post-colonial angst of being far away by emulating theatre from the 'centre'. As Thomson notes, mainstream theatre in New Zealand has preferred content that represents life from

elsewhere, Britain and the United States especially (Thomson 1984, 8). Perhaps the inclination towards staging drama from the rest of the English-speaking world is a way of dealing with feeling isolated – a way of suggesting that the distance between ‘here’ and ‘there’, culturally at least, is not so great because professional theatre companies can also stage what is considered to be ‘great’ theatre, both classic and contemporary, in New Zealand. This notion is reflected in the way the established theatre audience in New Zealand (usually middle class, middle aged Pakeha) are less inclined towards material that does relate to New Zealand – it seems only to point out the distance/difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’.

At first glance, the plays of Roger Hall appear to defy the notion that established theatre audiences dislike New Zealand-based content. From the 1970s onwards, Hall has been the most popular New Zealand playwright, producing a number of plays and musicals with New Zealand content and, in doing so, gaining equal billing in mainstream theatres with plays from elsewhere. However, Hall’s success may be attributed to the way he emulates popular English plays, representing the fears and phobias of his middle class, middle-aged New Zealand audience in popular comedies that can also be seen to ‘narrow the gap’ between here and there. In a recent *Listener* article, Hall referred to British playwright Alan Ayckbourn as his role model and Ayckbourn’s representation of middle class, middle-aged life as a style of theatre that he has adapted to the New Zealand situation.<sup>4</sup> In Hall’s plays, the experience that is represented, the content, is local, but played within a form that tends to resolve conflicts and affirm the middle class values of an audience that may be in England as much as New Zealand.

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<sup>4</sup> Hall is interviewed in the *Listener*, Vol 211, No 3523, 17-23 November 2007, p 3.

The tendency towards resolution in Hall's plays may be seen to reflect the influence of the well-made play formula on New Zealand playwriting. As Marvin Carlson suggests, despite alterations since its invention (by Eugène Scribe 1791-1861) as a challenge to romanticism and melodrama in the nineteenth century, the well-made play continues to be the starting point for Western playwriting:

The influence of Scribe on subsequent drama, can hardly be overestimated. The realistic dramatists of the later nineteenth century – most notably Ibsen – drew upon his technique of careful construction and preparation of effects, and through their example the well-made play became and still remains the traditional model of play construction (Carlson 1993/1984, 215-216).

For example, one of Hall's most popular plays, *Middle Aged Spread* (1977), exhibits the hallmarks of the well-made play structure. The play revolves around a withheld secret (adultery), which leads to building tension at a dinner party involving three middle class couples. There is a battle of wits between the protagonist (the adulterer) and the antagonist (another adulterer), who eventually reveals the secret, forming the climax of the play. A resolution at the play's end is suggested when the protagonist answers his wife's query as to "what do we do now?" by saying, "What we do, Elizabeth, is the dishes" (Hall 1977, 82) – that is, that they should put aside questions that may challenge their middle class existence and continue on as normal. Other playwrights in New Zealand who have attempted to emulate Hall's success have also followed this formula. In many ways, the focus on resolving middle class anxiety means that plays are set in New Zealand but may be seen to reflect Western cultures with similar class values. Hence, Hall's successful attempts to have his plays staged in England as well as New Zealand, and his ability to write similar plays in a specifically English setting (*Fifty-Fifty* 1982).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hall has also produced four solo performances: *C'mon Black*, *Mr Punch*, *The Book Club*, *You Gotta be Joking*. According to Playmarket (the major agent for New Zealand playwrights), these have had varying degrees of success in New Zealand but not as much as his larger ensemble plays such as *Middle Aged Spread*, *Social Climbers* and *Dirty Weekends*.

Plays that have attempted to challenge the middle class orthodoxy of New Zealand culture – in particular, to contend with the New Zealand’s distinctive feelings of unsettledness – have struggled to find an audience. Confrontational work plays briefly before being relegated to school curricula. Bruce Mason’s *The Pohutukawa Tree* (1957), Greg McGee’s *Foreskin’s Lament* (1981), Mervyn Thompson’s *Songs to the Judges* (1983) and Stuart Hoar’s *Squatter* (1988) are but a few examples of plays that may be considered important but are rarely, if ever, staged. However, plays such as those by Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee or Tom Stoppard are regularly staged in mainstream New Zealand theatres, such are the demands of the established theatre audience for theatre from elsewhere.

Solo performance, on the other hand, has reached an established as well as an unestablished theatre audience in New Zealand. It may be that a wider non-theatre-going public, albeit for different reasons, matches the established audience’s dislike of attempts by New Zealand playwrights at conventional drama. If the established audience likes theatre that closes the distance between ‘here’ and ‘there’, the larger, *potential* theatre audience seems to find such work to be removed from everyday life. Furthermore, rather than the audience travelling to the theatres in the main centres in order to see a play from elsewhere, solo performers have been able to take their work to the audience, travelling not only through the main centres but also to the rural areas where a lack of conventional theatre structures make conventional theatre difficult.

Furthermore, the solo performer speaking directly to the audience about life in New Zealand is closer to the kind of entertainment or communal interaction that I experienced in the small rural New Zealand communities in which I grew up. Living in these rural communities, and staying with friends in other remote rural areas, I experienced variety concerts and fundraising events in which the local community

would come together in halls, churches, or pubs and watch and participate in a range of performances. Onto the 'stage' would come enthusiastic, brave (not always drunk) individuals 'giving it a go' for the entertainment of others: using an array of ideas, forms, styles, props, costumes, whatever seemed right in the moment, performers, alone or with others, made it up as they went along, 'spinning a yarn', and having a good time doing it. It is possible to see this kind of amateur entertainment as being vital in smaller communities, especially before the advent of television, film and the Internet aided in overcoming an acute sense of isolation.

The solo performances I am considering in this thesis are not the same as the action in these places. They may be similar in creating a sense of intimacy but the solo performer is an 'outsider' coming into the community. However, far from diminishing the experience, this adds a special sense of occasion to the meeting between performer and audience. Moreover, the solo performer (and, in some cases, the crew he travels with) comes to see something in such meetings, perhaps a sense of community that, in the process of finding it, is revealed to have been absent, not-quite there or in some way tenuous. This has been a common point made by the solo performers that I have read about and talked to during the course of this study – there is a recurring notion that solo performance allows performers to feel 'in touch' with the New Zealand community in a way they had not before. What it suggests, perhaps, is that the quintessential New Zealand experience may be searched for in the margins – in the rural, for example, rather than the urban.

It is, possibly, a sense of 'incompleteness' that has made solo performances accessible and, therefore, successful in New Zealand. Unlike the larger well-made play that speaks of wholeness, the solo performance somehow seems made-up rather than well-made. Historically, solo performance has emerged as a hybrid form that is

*in between* established ideas of the literary, the theatrical, and other presentation styles such as the lecture and the sermon. This allows greater freedom to experiment with different forms and styles because the impetus is to reach an audience by using what is most effective, rather than attempting to live up to established ways of doing things. In New Zealand, this approach is closer to the amateur, DIY (do it yourself) tradition. It is possible to see solo performance emulating this approach, crossing over generic boundaries as a way of adapting to the particular environment of New Zealand as a hybrid post-colonial culture.

The crossing of generic boundaries that comes with solo performance resulted in the changing of the subtitle of this thesis. Originally, I was working with the subtitle ‘Solo Performance in New Zealand Theatre’. However, this was changed to ‘Solo Performance in New Zealand’ in order to reflect the diversity of solo performance in New Zealand. I felt the need to take away the restrictions that might be implied by the idea of ‘theatre’ to include a wider range of possibilities. I do not mean to suggest that solo performance is not theatre but that this form *redefines* what theatre is, relative to the New Zealand experience. Not only is this because solo performance in New Zealand crosses a wide variety of forms and styles but also because a range of performers of different backgrounds have taken to the stage alone. I will, for example, consider *A Long Undressing* (1995), Michael Parmenter’s solo performance, which is a continuation of his experimentations between dance and theatre.

It is because of the diversity of performers that take to the stage alone in New Zealand, and the range of styles they use, that I use the term “solo performance” as opposed to some of the other terms that are used to describe this kind of theatrical activity. Peterson, for example, uses the term “Dramatic Monologue”, while Gilbert

and Tompkins use the term “monodrama” to refer to performances that involve a lone performer on stage. I have not used such terms because they seem to me to place an onus on the literary tradition of theatre – the idea of theatre as dramatic literature – whereas “solo performance”, more than the terms “monodrama” and “monologue”, implies a focus on the act of *performance*. I want to emphasize that my approach to this kind of theatre in New Zealand begins with an analysis of the performance traditions used or that may be seen to influence the work. Not only is the term solo performance more applicable to the range of performances I am considering, but the creators of these solo performances often begin with a performance style rather than a written text, and it is within this style or tradition that a more complete understanding is possible of the ways the performance affects a New Zealand audience.

As a way of describing this particular style of solo performance in New Zealand I use the term *actor alone*. To begin with, this points to the relationship between solo performer and audience in New Zealand as being one that attempts to negotiate a sense of isolation. But it also points to the approach I take in examining the solo form as a particularly *theatrical* expression of the experience of living in New Zealand. I explore the ways in which the actor alone takes to the stage and, in an effort to reach an audience, assumes different roles. That is, I look at how the role-play of the lone actor re-presents aspects of the New Zealand identity or identities within New Zealand. In other words, I explore how the actor alone becomes a representative of New Zealand, or some fraction of it, and how, in the process of doing so, the actor alone on stage might allow the audience to reconsider the notion of what it means to be a New Zealander. In this way, I consider the actor alone as a representative of changing notions of post-colonial identity in New Zealand – an examination of solo performance *as* an expression of the search for post-colonial

identity in New Zealand. What does the actor alone tell us about the experience of living in New Zealand? And, what does the actor alone tells us about theatre in New Zealand?

As I said earlier, there are different ways in which the solo performance reflects New Zealand identity and this is affected by socio-historical changes. Shortly, I will consider Gilbert and Tompkins theory on monodrama in post-colonial cultures, as it seems particularly applicable to certain solo performances in New Zealand, especially the more recent, in which the search for a national identity seems no longer to be relevant. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider earlier developments in New Zealand arts and literature that give insight into the ways the actor alone reflects the search for a national identity. It is, for instance, possible to see a parallel between the actor alone and the ‘man alone’, an iconic image that pervades New Zealand arts and literature. This trope of an emerging post-colonial identity draws on the pioneer motif of the English settlers. But it was in the 1930s with a group now referred to as the ‘cultural nationalists’ that the ‘man alone’ came to prominence as a signifier of shifting attitudes, turning away from Mother England and facing the land before him as the place he intends to call home.

A prominent example of this shift is found in the work of John Mulgan. Mulgan’s father, Alan, had been part of a generation of ‘exiled’ writers who wrote ‘love letters’ in verse and prose, pining for the green fields of England or trying to imagine New Zealand in that mould. The 1939 novel of John Mulgan, *Man Alone* presents an image that reflects many of the concerns of his contemporaries. The narrative follows a man’s (Johnson) journey to establish himself in Depression-era New Zealand after leaving war-scarred Europe. However, he finds in New Zealand a land and people that are hostile and repressed and he is forced to escape into the bush,



alone. Eventually, he decides to return to the ongoing wars in Europe. Patrick Evans considers *Man Alone* to be a kind of post-colonial patricide:

But *Man Alone* doesn't simply bounce off the father's writing; it tries to repel it, to extinguish it, to burn it out and destroy it completely, and all it represents [...] This resolute debunking gives the novel its almost agoraphobic sense of space and movement: the decorative cosiness of Alan Mulgan's *A Pilgrim's Way in New Zealand* (the work his son seemed most to reject) is banished completely, the narcissism of the colonial becoming displaced into mysterious apparitions of Mt Ruapehu, which, like the Mount of the True Prophet, seems to move closer each of the seven times it appears in the book. (Evans 1990, 130-131)

The themes of isolation and conformity raised and explored in Mulgan's *Man Alone* characterizes the work of poets and artists of the time, consumed with a need to articulate a sense of place. Throughout this work there is an ongoing tension caused by the search for a post-colonial identity, caught between the desire for a separate identity and the need to belong to a wider community.

This tension recurs in the work of writers and poets that use the 'man alone' as a way to represent their sense of national identity. On the one hand, the narrative of a solitary (male) figure searching for an identity may be considered an unspecific manifestation, that is, a typical reflection of the artist as 'outsider' that is no more particular to New Zealand than Europe or North America; lonely, male characters feature in the work of Albert Camus or Ernest Hemingway for instance, and the 'man alone' as romantic image is certainly readable in the literature of Mulgan, Allen Curnow, Frank Sargeson, Denis Glover, A.R.D Fairburn, R.A.K. Mason, Charles Brasch and James K. Baxter. On the other hand, it is also possible to see in the works of these writers an attempt to engage with the experience of being a New Zealander

by adapting form and styles from elsewhere. In the process, a voice emerges that is distinctive – arising due to the search for a sense of place and national identity.<sup>6</sup>

The tension is also readable in the content of such work – it seems the ‘man alone’ carries a lot of ‘baggage’. Lawrence Jones suggests that in *Man Alone*, for instance, the society that is represented is “narrow, materialistic, puritanical” and contains “a great deal of latent animosity and violence” (Jones 1998, 158). These traits appear to be the leftovers from settler forebears who first stepped ashore with their ‘baggage’ after a long voyage from Victorian England. They encountered a strange land and even stranger indigenous inhabitants. Through the reoccurrences, critiques, challenges and re-imaginings of the ‘man alone’, it becomes clear that this ‘baggage’ is not something that can be discarded but which is continuously being confronted and negotiated in the search for a national identity. This negotiation, as I shall discuss in a moment, is also undertaken by those who have been excluded from the formulations of New Zealand identity as Pakeha and male.

The attempt to come to terms with the exclusion and isolation that such an identity creates has been the bread and butter of ongoing New Zealand arts and literature, including dramatic literature that had not found a substantial audience in New Zealand.<sup>7</sup> There is a sense of unsettledness that comes with the attempts of the progeny of the settlers to establish indigeneity in relation to a former home and a new one with inhabitants already well established. Often, this has led to an inclusion of Maori ideas and terms of reference to intimate a closer relationship to the local

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed exploration and history of New Zealand literature see Curnow (1945), Holcroft (1951), Baxter (1957), Stead (1981), Evans (1990), Murray (1998) and Jones (1998). Also see Jones (1985) and McLean (2003) for observations about the ‘man alone’ in New Zealand literature.

<sup>7</sup> For example, McNaughton points to *Clay* (1936), as reflecting a “puritanical society searching for integration” that was a feature of the introverted characters of Sargeson’s writing, but suggests that the experimentation with expressionism in the play did not find a substantial audience and that such plays do not “constitute a substantial corpus within New Zealand drama” (McNaughton 1981, 37). He says that this takes place later in the 1960s – presumably, with the likes of Mason writing plays exploring the underbelly of New Zealand society.

environment, reflecting the attempt to shift from the monocultural view of Pakeha to a nation that is true to its bicultural heritage.

Following the literary precedent (and running alongside the theatrical equivalent of the actor alone) has been a consideration of the baggage of the man alone in film. *Sleeping Dogs* (Dir. Roger Donaldson, 1977 – based on the 1971 novel *Smith's Dream* by C.K. Stead), *Smash Palace* (Dir. Roger Donaldson, 1981), *Bad Blood* (Dir. Mike Newell, 1982), and *The Quiet Earth* (Dir. Geoff Murphy, 1985) may be seen to offer variations on the theme of the 'man alone'. They are a few of the films represented in Sam Neill's documentary on New Zealand film, *Cinema of Unease* (1995), a phrase coined to reflect the way New Zealand cinema has come to represent the ongoing tensions that arise in the search for a post-colonial identity – especially between Maori and Pakeha.

What becomes apparent in all this work is that the 'outsider' on the margins is the norm in New Zealand. This situation is perhaps best exemplified by the work of those that have been excluded from formulations of a national identity comprised of Pakeha males. Writer Janet Frame, for example, in autobiographically based literature such as *Owls Do Cry* (1957), and her autobiographical trilogy *To the Is-land* (1982), *An Angel at my Table* (1984) and *The Envoy from the Mirror City* (1985), reflects a female perspective of the repression that comes with growing up in a New Zealand culture obsessed with conformity. In 1990, director Jane Campion produced *An Angel At My Table*, a film based on the trilogy, offering, not so much a diversion from the 'man alone' films of the late 1970s and 1980s, but a companion-piece that is in dialogue with the 'male' tradition. Jones, for example, refers to Frame as part of the 'woman alone' tradition in New Zealand literature (1998, 158-159), and Evans, in his recent *The Long Forgetting* (2007), suggests that Frame's work "grows out of the side

of cultural nationalism, duplicating its agnostic, even masochistic assumptions” (Evans 2007, 151).

A similar consideration of the outsider negotiating with the ‘inside’ is also readable in literature by Maori authors exploring Maori identity – Evans, for example, makes this comparison (Evans 2007, 151). Witi Ihimaera is a prominent example with (semi-autobiographical) novels such as *Tangi* (1973). The issues represented in such work offer an especially different perspective on formulations of New Zealand identity as isolated and individualistic, as the idea of community and the collective is central to the marae-based life of Maori culture. A tension between traditional Maori values and those of Pakeha can be read into Niki Caro’s translation of Ihimaera’s novel *Whale Rider* (1987) into film (2002).

It is possible to see the actor alone as responding to the same kind of post-colonial angst of the ‘man alone’ and the ‘outsider’ represented in New Zealand literature and film. It is the solo form, perhaps, growing up on the margins of the recognized theatre that epitomises the experience of living in New Zealand. It may be seen to continue in the tradition of New Zealand literature and alongside New Zealand film, which have explored the condition of isolation as one central to the experience of being of this place. The live experience of solo performance allows for a contact with an audience that draws an audience together in a space (unlike literature). It allows for a live and direct relationship between performer and audience (unlike film). There is also experimentation with form as a means of reaching an audience (which is uncommon in mainstream theatre practice). In many ways, the experimentation that comes with solo performance illustrates the ways in which isolation can be an *advantage*. The actor alone may be seen to take up the margins, embodying isolation,

and, in so doing, revealing both the potential and limitations that comes from such a position.

However, at this point, I want to return to my central thesis that distinguishes between solo performances in the way they represent New Zealand identity. Although the assumption of the margins may be true of all solo performance in New Zealand, there are variations in how the margins are used to comment upon that identity in relation to the audience. I have been looking at the 'man alone' as a tradition from which solo performance, beginning with Mason and *The End of the Golden Weather*, may be seen to emerge, and I will return shortly to consider other solo performances that may be seen to follow in this tradition. Arguably though, the 'man alone' tradition – a man going out into an (almost) empty land to find a community, and a national identity – has passed. At the very least, it is not considered fashionable at present. With more recent solo performance, there is a change of emphasis in the way identity is represented, reflecting, as Peterson suggests, the increasing multicultural constituency of New Zealand. That is, the idea of a monocultural society and, later, a bicultural society have given way to an idea of plurality in a way that suggests a collective Kiwi identity is firmly established. In the process, solo performance has increased significantly as a way to make visible these diverse and marginal identities, replacing the search for a wider collective identity that is unknown with the exploration of identities considered on the margins of the larger 'Kiwi identity'.

To consider these changes, I turn to Gilbert and Tompkins' approach to monodrama in *Post-Colonial Drama*. Their consideration of the solo form is particular to more recent examples of solo performance in post-colonial societies and is, therefore, applicable to the solo performances that reflect a diversifying, multicultural New Zealand. Most of the performances that Gilbert and Tompkins

consider are by women working in diverse and multicultural contexts in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. Gilbert and Tompkins' focus on the way the solo form challenges the idea of a unitary, fixed and complete identity is supported by examples from cosmopolitan societies such as Singapore and Canada. In the examples to which they refer, the focus is on the ways the lone performer comes to challenge orthodox spectatorship, and, thereby, the dominant cultural values and hierarchies within a society. Their analysis is guided by post-colonial and feminist theory.

Gilbert and Tompkins refer to solo performance as representing the “splits” of identity (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 232). This, they suggest, is mainly achieved through two different kinds of monodrama: either through an actor playing multiple characters or by a solo performer playing a single character and taking on different personae (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 232-3). Both of these kinds of performance have also been used in New Zealand. Gilbert and Tompkins explain that each method is active in “(de)constructing” identity, showing the different selves that make up the individual. They argue:

Aside from reassessing the body's boundaries, the monodrama is a crucial vehicle for exploring post-colonial subjectivity because it is almost always biographical or autobiographical. Women in particular employ this form as it befits the expression of an identity often fractured by multiple discourses. The freedom of the empty stage and the prospect of solitude, audience notwithstanding, prompts the performer (who is frequently also the writer) to express parts of his/her self kept hidden in more public situations. The variety of subjects that the monodrama generates helps redefine self and identity as the body metamorphoses into new, more varied personae. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 233)

Gilbert and Tompkins suggest that the solo performer can challenge conventional ideas of identity in a post-colonial culture by representing and embodying hybridity and difference. The performer's recollection of the past allows the audience to see and hear different experiences and, therefore, makes them aware of the diverse identities within their society.

As examples, Gilbert and Tompkins refer to performances such as Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985) and George Seremba's *Come Good Rain* (1992). They describe Kon's performance as representing "the life of a wealthy Singaporean woman, in all the guises she adopted – mother, daughter, wife, employer, friend" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 233). Through such role-playing, Gilbert and Tompkins suggest that Kon unsettles the usual idea of an actor playing a role in theatre to point towards the way the body "is inscribed and transformed in the nexus of actor/character/audience interaction" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 234). This idea would appear to fit with my earlier suggestion that the solo performer offers a direct relationship with the audience, and, in assuming different roles, offers a different experience to conventional theatre. That is, the solo performer who takes on multiple roles offers an unusual experience for an audience that is used to seeing an actor playing a single character. Gilbert and Tompkins imply that the solo performer taking on multiple roles can potentially be a way of challenging prevailing social ideas of identity by challenging orthodox representation of identity in the theatre. Importantly, though, the focus is on individual identity in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality and so on, and this is without relating to constructions of national identity.

Gilbert and Tompkins see Seremba's performance as combining the two traits of the monodrama. Seremba adopts a central role as a narrator to tell the story of a Ugandan exile (based on Seremba's experiences). Through the course of the performance, Seremba also represents different roles from the point of view of the narrator. He plays:

[T]he story-teller, the son, the student, George Bwanika, the political satirist, the exile in Kenya, the teacher, the erstwhile political protester, the prisoner marked for death, the escapee from the apparently inescapable graveyard of the executed in Namanve Forest in Uganda, and the exiled playwright living in Canada. (1996, 234)

In doing so, Gilbert and Tompkins argue that the performer comes to defy the idea of a unified identity. Seremba offers the audience the diverse attitudes that exist in post-colonial Uganda. As a result, many and different attitudes are revealed, not only in a broader society but also within the individual who is a reflection of that society. In the solo performances of Kon and Seremba, it seems there is an attempt to come to terms with a post-colonial identity that is unsettled and (always) in the process of changing. As we shall see, the different kinds of solo performances to which Gilbert and Tompkins refer – the multiple-role monodrama and the single character demonstrating different personae – have been widely used in New Zealand to represent the experience of an evolving identity.

In the performances to which Gilbert and Tompkins refer, the solo form is used to represent the diversity of multicultural societies. In particular, their suggestion that this form is often taken up by women, many of whom are of ethnicities other to the mainstream white identity in Western culture, suggests a “fluid” identity (1996, 234). This idea of fluidity seems to be a result of the increasing pluralistic aspect of societies as ideas of the national give way to the multicultural and the global. With the notion of nation-building dissolving, the assumption of different individual identities, which can be changed and revised, is more prevalent. This is perhaps something that is more established in cosmopolitan cultures such as Singapore and Canada. It is something relatively new to a smaller, until recently monocultural culture such as New Zealand but is becoming increasingly recognised as the distinctive characteristics of multiculturalism and global ideals take hold. It is reflected not only in the form and content of performances but also in the context in which they take place.



Gilbert and Tompkins do not, for example, give details as to where these performances are held or who the audience might be. It seems that these solo performances are designed to move and play for a diverse range of audiences in a diverse range of places. In this way, it might be said that these performances are designed to play in an ‘international’ context. According to the performers I have spoken to, there is, currently, an established ‘circuit’ that allows solo performers to travel, moving to different countries – including New Zealand – and performing in various arts festivals. Many solo performances, similar to those described by Gilbert and Tompkins, have become increasingly popular in New Zealand. In particular, many of the country’s arts festivals usually feature international solo performances.

It might be said, then, that the form and content echo this sense of movement, as the economy, manoeuvrability and adaptability of the solo form are an attractive option for performers to be able to move in an international context. Solo performance in New Zealand has also come to reflect this kind of movement. Recently, many solo performances in New Zealand seem created with the intent of travelling elsewhere; the Edinburgh Fringe Festival is a particularly popular destination. Many of the performances that I consider have toured through New Zealand and gone on to tour internationally; some of them were conceived or performed elsewhere before coming to be performed in New Zealand. These solo performances reflect a culture in which isolation, as it once was in New Zealand arts and literature, is no longer a main feature – the land is full and diverse and part of a larger world. And yet, to me, it seems that the effects of isolation are still perceivable in solo performance in New Zealand. What, then, is the nature of this isolation that drives the solo performer to the stage? Is it related to the isolation that has been

represented and confronted by the actor alone in the past? Or is it something different and unrelated?

In order to answer these questions I need to explain why I am asking them in the first place. I am asking these questions with a view to making theatre in New Zealand. I was drawn to this project because of my attempts to work in theatre in New Zealand, the trigger being my decision to create a solo performance. This decision was based on my desire, not only to keep working in theatre in New Zealand, but also to continue exploring New Zealand through theatre. To me, theatre has appealed as a way to find a sense of community, which I now see, in retrospect, as something I felt to be missing. I have felt, and continue to feel, a sense of isolation. But in the example of the actor alone I see a similar search, through theatre, for some sense of community. For this reason, I explore solo performance, from the past to the present time and consider why it has been such a particularly effective example of theatre that engages with the New Zealand condition, my condition, as one that is dogged by isolation.

The cause of this isolation is tied to the two strands I have explored through this introduction. It is related to the historical condition that comes to me via my settler heritage (a male-oriented tradition) and the recent sense of isolation that seems to be related to life in a multicultural and 'globalized' society (possibly a female-oriented culture governed by the fluidity referred to by Gilbert and Tompkins). I see both of these conditions as affecting how I come to work in the theatre. I want, briefly, to explore how these strands come together through me and how this affects the way I see solo performance in New Zealand.

I think the historical sense of isolation is something that still exists in contemporary New Zealand society. I see this, for example, in the process that led me

to the theatre and this thesis. When I decided that I wanted to pursue a career as an actor, I immediately set my sights on places like London, New York and Los Angeles. I was told that if I wanted to *secure* a career as an actor, it was more lucrative to establish a career in film and television than theatre, and the place to do so was in more established industries overseas rather than in New Zealand. My intention to do so, I now see, was part of an ongoing cultural drift – the inevitable consequence of a settler heritage in New Zealand – that flows from New Zealand back to the ‘real’ world. A popular belief is that to become somebody, economically, professionally and culturally, is to become established in places where something actually happens; not in New Zealand where, it seems, nothing ever happens. This seems to be what leads many to the Big OE (Overseas Experience), which has seen, and continues to see, a large number of young New Zealanders (especially Pakeha) travel to London every year.

I never quite did the Big OE thing. In what was meant to be a brief diversion before setting sails for elsewhere, I enrolled at University – I was working at the same time to make the money that would help get me into drama school overseas. I signed up for a theatre course and, then, a pleasant surprise (and shock). While I was studying the history and theory of theatre and putting theory into practice, I discovered that theatre might actually have something to do with New Zealand – that it might actually have something to do with me in New Zealand.

Through my studies at University, it occurred to me that my attraction to theatre had a cultural basis. Specifically, I realized that theatre had always appealed to me (subconsciously at least) as a way to connect with a community in New Zealand from which I felt estranged. I began to reconsider my formative experiences in theatre, which had included performing in community halls as a boy and, later, as an

MC in school revues – both of these involved solo performances. I realized that in these experiences the thrill of theatre – focussed by the direct address of a solo performance – was in the engagement with a wider community, and this was particularly exciting because the sense of community was something I felt to be absent in everyday life, or, at least, not quite there.

I remember being especially excited by a theatre production I saw during my early studies. *MedeaMaterial*, written by Heiner Müller, was directed by Peter Falkenberg for the Free Theatre in 1995, and had a profound effect on my limited notion of what theatre and acting could be. This production had the audience moving around the actors as if they were in a nightclub. The audience could stand alongside or peep at the actors through holes cut through the walls of the set. Each of the actors took up different interpretations of the Jason and Medea relationship, reconsidered by Müller, and then Falkenberg, from Euripides' famous tragedy. I remember feeling quite vulnerable and exposed. I was always so aware of the other spectators I was moving around, moving with. As I was doing so, I suddenly became aware that I was actually part of the performance, and I began considering the implications. I felt strangely isolated and, at the same time, somehow connected to others who were experiencing something similar. Indeed, this was a sensation that was confirmed in the conversations with other audience members following the performance – conversations I remember vividly because they were so different from my previous theatre-going experience. I felt part of a community.

At a very simple level, I was struck by the way this production felt so alive and immediate (and confrontational). This was unusual as far as my experience of theatre in New Zealand was concerned. I was used to sitting in a seat with the lights down watching actors perform as if we, the audience, were not there, and where all

the conflict seemed hermetically sealed behind the fourth wall. I think the kind of theatre experience offered in *MedeaMaterial* was appealing precisely because such a focus on the live and immediate presented a way of engaging with my immediate environment and finding a sense of community. The production made me think that perhaps working in theatre in New Zealand might actually be a way of engaging with the life that exists here. This contradicted my previous belief that theatre had to be high art escapism emulating performance from West End and Broadway, a theatre that reflected the notion that New Zealand was nowhere, a land of limbo without a history or future, a frustrating place of exile in which the main preoccupation was plotting escape (like Medea). I began working with the Free Theatre in 1997 and am still doing so today.

Through ongoing theatre work, I have also come to consider the contemporary sense of isolation. I think a better way to describe this feeling would be to use the term *alienation*. When Karl Marx used the term, he was referring to the worker's loss of control under the working conditions of modern industrial capitalism. Whereas a worker once worked under his own conditions – set his own hours, had a hand in all facets of production – Marx suggested that the factory and manager of the modern industrial era took away such autonomy. This created a further, related sense of alienation, as the worker who once bartered and traded directly with his community lost personal interaction with this community. Marx saw this as leading to an inhumane society.<sup>8</sup>

Today, the machines or technology that Marx saw as coming between the worker and his community are said to bring people closer together – to make connections. Cell phones and the Internet are perhaps considered the most useful in

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<sup>8</sup> See Marx (1867/1999, 383-6)

this regard. Yet, there is also the feeling that such technology actually inhibits the possibility of community. Sitting in front of my computer, alone, I can ‘connect’ to online communities and feel a sense of belonging – for a while. But it is not long before I feel the ‘unrealness’ of this ‘connection’, especially as the sound of voices comes through my window. I find it strange, however, when I get outside and see people walking around with their attention firmly strapped to a cell phone, their thumbs moving in a blur, texting someone unseen. On the one hand, the Internet and cell phones allow for the coming together of different groups, a way of making connections with others that might not be possible otherwise. On the other hand, I have found that these devices can also accentuate a sense of isolation, creating a feeling of being part of a wider world but leading in actuality to increased seclusion. In this latter instance, the idea of being connected through such technology is contradictory. It appears, to me, to create disconnection from the environment the individual moves within. In this sense, the community always seems to be somewhere else – a place to get to.

It seems that movement through cyberspace is considered preferable. Perhaps this is because in cyberspace it is possible to create and recreate identity. It is possible to create avatars that represent different ideas and images of the self. These avatars typify identity in a contemporary ‘global’ society as a new sort of solo performance – a cyber, solo performance where roles can be assumed and dropped at anytime. This kind of role-playing appears to offer opportunities that seem unachievable in everyday life. I can relate to the hopelessness or inevitability that might lead to seeing cyberspace as an alternative. I have been frustrated by the way in which late capitalism, in the guise of consumer culture, seems to offer so few possibilities beyond those that are prescribed.

Despite the idea of inclusion and the possibility of difference that is said to take place in a multicultural, consumer society, my experience has been the opposite. If the community hall was once a place where people gathered in New Zealand, today it seems that the mall is now the common meeting place. The offer of variety and difference that is advertised by malls seems contradicted by the endless rows of look-alike stores selling much the same merchandise with a slight variation in branding. Clothing, shoes, and accessories all seem geared towards a branding of the individual as part of a particular community. The possibility of taking on different roles is only possible if they help maintain the dominant structures upon which contemporary culture is based. In this way, ‘difference’ is only superficial. It is a variation on an already established image rather than something other, new or original. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1998), Jean Baudrillard suggests a loss of what he calls *singularity* in consumer culture with the “industrial production of differences”:

To differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, to label oneself by reference to an abstract model, to a combinatorial pattern of fashion, and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any *singularity*, since these can only arise in concrete, conflictual relations with others and the world. This is the miracle and the tragedy of differentiation [...] the differences are not differences and, instead of marking a person out as someone singular, they mark rather his conformity with a code, his integration into a sliding scale of values. (Baudrillard 1998, 87-88)

Baudrillard points out the problematic nature of the *personalized* in consumer culture, where, ironically, the idea of ‘difference’ comes to replace the contradictions of otherness:

There is, *first*, a structural logic of differentiation, which produces individuals as *personalized*, that is to say, as different one from another, but in terms of general models and a code, to which, in the very act of particularizing themselves, they conform. (Baudrillard 1998, 92)

Anything that might be outside the logic of consumer culture is recoded, rebranded as 'different', marginal or fringe and, therefore, controlled because "no revolution is possible at the level of code" (Baudrillard 1998, 94). To break with this logic, to attempt and do something *truly* other, is, if not impossible, then extremely difficult.

I have found this to be particularly true in my experiences working in the theatre in New Zealand. It is difficult to maintain a career in the theatre, especially the kind of experimental theatre that I am interested in, which often involves devising work (which takes time) and working with a group of collaborators. It does not seem to fit within the framework of a capitalist society driven by an emphasis on easily consumed, mass-produced goods. In the mainstream theatre this seems to result in companies turning out work, as quickly as possible, which targets an established market. Actors tend to work as individuals, moving between companies in order to maintain a career. In this sense, the idea of community that drew me to the theatre seems difficult to obtain or maintain – a solo performance seemed like a good idea because maintaining a working group is difficult. I saw solo performance as way to keep working in theatre, which, as I say, appealed to me as a way of overcoming (if only for a while) a sense of isolation and alienation – to find a sense of community.

The different ways in which solo performance may be seen to challenge isolation and alienation is explored throughout the thesis. I look closely at three solo performances in which the actor alone reflects the search for a national identity: Bruce Mason's *The End of the Golden Weather* (1959), Mervyn Thompson's *Coaltown Blues* (1984) and *Michael James Manaia* (1991), written by John Broughton and performed by Jim Moriarty. In these three performances, staggered over the space of forty plus years, the actor alone represents a search for what it means to be a New



Zealander. I consider each of these solo performances in their particular contexts to explore why it is that they were so successful in reaching a New Zealand audience.

My initial feeling is that these solo performances confront a collective idea of identity by calling attention to an especially tenuous individual identity that can be read socially. This may be something of which the audience is only peripherally aware as an established identity and a sense of community are said to already exist. That everything is not all right comes to be realized in the act of performance, the actor alone standing apart and recounting an unsettling past that is familiar. In this way, these performances suggest that identity is unresolved and to be worked through in the meeting between the actor alone and the community(s) to which he belongs but from which he feels isolated. These performances reach a New Zealand audience at different times because they represent and engage with a community that is in between or *liminal*.

Victor Turner uses the term liminal to describe a transitional phase of a rite of passage, the ambiguous zone between a soon-to-be-former status quo and a new one, not yet attained.<sup>9</sup> I think this idea is applicable to post-colonial New Zealand and the actor alone as an expression of this transition from former colony to separate state. As a form that is not-quite-theatre, not-quite-not-theatre, the form of solo performance is ideally suited to representing a New Zealand identity that is, likewise, in between. My use of such phrasing (the ‘not-nots’) is borrowed from Richard Schechner who collaborated with Turner in exploring ideas of the “liminoid” – a variation on the idea of the liminal. This adaptation looks to apply the principles of the liminal to a post-agrarian society from which the theory of liminality is taken.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the rite of

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<sup>9</sup> See Turner (1982, 24-25).

<sup>10</sup> Turner’s theory builds upon anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s observations in *Rites of Passage* (1960). For Schechner, see also *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985) and *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (1993).

passage or community ritual within an agrarian society is particularly conservative, geared towards realigning the community or participants of a ritual with the status quo, Turner considers the liminoid as an application of the liminal in post-agrarian societies in which such rituals are no longer undertaken.

Turner, with Schechner, argues that contemporary society tends towards events such as theatre as a way of re-presenting the dominant ideas of a culture. In his theoretical and practical experiments from the 1960s to the present day, Schechner has attempted to work with the idea of the liminoid to challenge contemporary society. That is, he has attempted to create theatre that can *change* society by having the audience enter into an *experience* where they are challenged to consider their time and place in relation to others in the event, including performers and audience. In this way, the audience – who they are and where they come from – is being explored, interrogated, and challenged through the course of performance, creating a sense of community. In a strange way, an idea of community (the established version) is destroyed in the process of creating a new one.

This is the potential that I discern in solo performance in New Zealand, a theatrical form that might be considered liminoid or, at least, point to a theatre that has the potential to be liminoid. It may be that solo performance is most effective when engaging with the liminality of New Zealand identity. In doing so, it seems that the actor alone creates a sense of ‘*communitas*’. This is another of Turner’s terms, which, in this case, is used to describe the way in which an audience or participants in rituals and theatrical activity come to feel, through performance, a sense of togetherness (1974, 274). Individuality is subsumed by a sense of presence and belonging within a larger group. In each of the performances I look at, I consider the

ways in which the performances create this sense of *communitas* by responding to a sense of cultural anxiety caused by isolation and alienation.

In the first chapter, I consider the way in which Mason's adaptation of the literary recital responded to a sense of anxiety in New Zealand in 1959. I examine the origins of this form in the context of nineteenth century England. I look to the example of Charles Dickens, perhaps the most famous exponent of the literary recital. I consider Dickens' use of the form as a means of finding out how Mason comes to exploit this form to engage with an audience in New Zealand in 1959. The success of Mason's use of such an 'English' form seems strange considering that at the time, New Zealand was turning away from Mother England in search of its own national identity. I consider how Mason's use of the form made particular sense at that particular time.

In the second chapter, I look at *Coaltown Blues* to consider Thompson's use of forms and styles of the working class traditions of music hall and vaudeville. Like Mason, it was with a sense of frustration that Thompson took up solo performance. He was finding it difficult to find a theatre that would stage the plays he had written. Yet, in solo performance Thompson found a form particularly suited to his aesthetic and politics. I look at these forms and styles in the context of nineteenth century Britain, and consider adaptations of working class forms in the theatre of Bertold Brecht and feminist theatre. This offers a comparison by which to explore Thompson's use of working class forms in the context of New Zealand in 1984. I consider how the depiction of life under the first Labour Government in *Coaltown Blues* struck a chord with a New Zealand audience recently released from the stranglehold of Robert Muldoon's regime and on the brink of the socio-economic upheaval of the fourth Labour Government.

The third chapter considers the solo performance *Michael James Manaia*, which was first performed in 1991. I explore the way in which this performance combines marae-based forms with ideas of Western theatre. In particular, I consider the use of *whaikorero* – traditional Maori oratory – that playwright John Broughton used to tell the story of a part Maori, part Pakeha Vietnam War veteran (played by Jim Moriarty). It seems that the communal idea of marae was central to this performance and resulted in a close collaboration between writer, actor, designer and musicians. I consider how the effectiveness of the performance may be due to the way it represented a bicultural identity at war with itself and at a time when the Treaty settlement process was attempting to address historical grievances caused by English settlement. I explore *Michael James Manaia* in this context to examine how it represents a bicultural identity through solo performance, challenging notions of harmonious biculturalism in New Zealand.

In each of these cases, the idea of the actor alone is to provoke a communal anxiety by pointing to unsettling experiences of a past that is shared. In Chapter Four, I examine solo performances that appear similar to the others considered – returning to the past in order to represent identities on the margins of New Zealand culture – but which have a different focus in the way they make contact with an audience. This analysis considers performances over a considerable time frame: *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (1978), *A Long Undressing* (1995), *Ka Shue/Letters Home* (1996), *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* (1997), *Krishnan's Dairy* (1997), and *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* (2007). As with the previous three chapters, I explore how these performances use form to reach an audience and consider what this might tell us about a contemporary theatre in New Zealand. In these solo performances, I argue, the potential of the form as a kind of political theatre is diminished.

My feeling (or hope) is that much can be gleaned by considering solo performance in New Zealand and with a view to creating theatre, now, in New Zealand. This will be discussed in the conclusion, which considers my findings in regard to the actor alone, and speculates as to what sort of approach might be useful for ongoing work in the theatre. In a sense, I go outside New Zealand, referring to my experience in the Free Theatre production of *Ella* (2004), a performance written by Bavarian playwright, novelist, actor and filmmaker Herbert Achternbusch. Although employing two actors, this performance is virtually a solo performance (one of the actors being so catatonic through the performance as to be more like a prop). *Ella* exploits the sort of directness that the actor alone employs to engage an audience. It is for this reason that I turn to discuss this performance as an example of theatre that is effective in reaching an audience in New Zealand. I discuss the ideas of the actor alone, past and present in relation to this performance, especially with a view to discussing the potential and limitations of the margins as a place to create theatre.

Taking up the margins is also a view advocated by Jill Dolan in her recent book *Utopia in Performance* (2005). Dolan explores a number of solo performances in the American context in order to consider how theatre there creates a sense of community. She also refers to Turner's idea of 'communitas' as something that these performances seek to create. This book was written in the context of an American society unsettled by the attacks on the World Trade Centre Towers in 2001. Many see these attacks as stemming from the problems associated with multiculturalism and globalisation. It is significant that Dolan turns to this marginal form of theatre in search of hope. In the conclusion, I shall critically assess Dolan's theory in relation to my own exploration of solo performance in New Zealand, to discuss how searching

for a national identity from the perspective of the margins exhibits the potential and limitations of theatre to inspire hope.

## Chapter One

### Beached:

#### The Construction of National Identity in Bruce Mason's

##### *The End of the Golden Weather*

I invite you to join me in a voyage into the past, to that territory of the past we call childhood. Consider, if you will, Te Parenga.

The opening to *The End of the Golden Weather*<sup>1</sup>

In 1959, Bruce Mason took to the makeshift stage at the New Zealand Players workshop and presented, for the first time, his solo performance *The End of the Golden Weather*. Mason would go on to perform *The End of the Golden Weather* nearly a thousand times over two decades, repeatedly touring New Zealand until ill-health prevented him shortly before his death in 1982. To my knowledge there are no visual recordings of the performance, other than still photographs. Mason did, however, produce an audio recording, preserving his iconic performance for generations to come.

What we as an audience miss out on by listening to the audio recording is the sight of Mason, dressed in a suit, taking to a stage that has only a chair and table, and telling a story based on his youth growing up in a small coastal town in 1930s New Zealand. We don't get to see him using gesture, mime and impersonation to represent the locals, the events and the experiences, all the details and nuance of a community called Te Parenga – the name he gives the beach that served as a childhood playground. However, what the audio recording does give us is the remarkable voice that Mason assumes to tell his story. When we first hear it, he is playing the role of a

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<sup>1</sup> (Mason, 1981b/1981a, 3).

narrator, and inviting the audience to join him at Te Parenga. He tells us that he wants to travel into a shared past of childhood.

To me, today, the voice seems awfully English. The tone is magisterial, slightly mocking in a way that suggests he may be laughing at himself, or, at least, his former self. This makes him sound almost condescending in a way that an adult might in considering the naïve preoccupations of a child. At the same time, the precision and care with which Mason picks out the distinguishing features of place, people and events, projects the desire to understand himself as a child. Enacting the role of a boy, Mason recounts the boy's friendship with Firpo, a disturbed man who not only names himself after a World Champion boxer but dreams of going to the Olympics. In the conversations that Mason performs between boy and man, we come to see that despite the ridicule Firpo receives at the hands of his local community, the boy sees in him the many possibilities of what he himself might one day be. It is as if Mason wants to embrace his past, finally, and this awkward little nook he calls Te Parenga, in order to find himself with an audience in the present, and to dream with them about what the future might look like. When he tells us that this is "my heritage, my world" (Mason 1981b/1981a, 4), there is the sense that this is something unique, and something shared.

Mason's solo performance was extraordinarily successful. For two decades, audiences around New Zealand filled theatres, churches, community halls, pubs and marae in often remote communities, to see and hear this solo performer convey his childhood through word and gesture. In a television interview, before his death in 1982, Mason claimed he had performed *The End of the Golden Weather* 984 times (Anderson 1982, interview on VHS). The performance is considered at length in the histories of New Zealand theatre, and the phrase 'the end of the golden weather' has



entered the New Zealand lexicon. The ongoing popularity of *The End of the Golden Weather* is suggested by its translation into a feature film in 1991. Peter Vere-Jones revived it as a solo performance in 2001, and at the time of writing, Stephen Lovatt, an actor well known from Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, was touring around the North Island with his version of *The End of the Golden Weather*.

In this chapter, I explore where it is that Mason's 'voice' comes from, the immediate context in which it was assumed, and consider how it spoke to a New Zealand audience. The form that Mason uses is from the English tradition of literary recital and this helps explain the pronounced tone and clipped intonation that he uses to narrate his story. The literary recital was popularised in the nineteenth century, most notably by Charles Dickens, who would enact the characters of his fiction with voice and gesture. In 1958, Mason saw the English actor Emlyn Williams, an exponent of the literary recital who was touring New Zealand. Williams played to sold-out audiences with his two performances, in which he imitated Dickens and Dylan Thomas (who was also well known for his literary recitals). Williams would perform as if he were Dickens or Thomas, reading from their literature and offering asides and insights that related to their lives. It was in this solo form that Mason came to recognize a way to get his work on stage, and it is from here that an appreciation of Mason's 'English' voice in the New Zealand context may begin.

As a way of understanding Mason's successful adaptation of the form to New Zealand, I begin by considering the literary recital in nineteenth century England. In some ways, it seems strange that Mason was able to reach an audience through such an English form when, at the time of his first performance, New Zealand was looking to establish a separate identity away from Mother England. I argue, however, that in taking up the form to represent images of New Zealand, Mason exploited the

hybridity of the literary recital to reflect a New Zealand community that was similarly in between, and, therefore, offered an effective mediation on what it meant to be a New Zealander. In exploring the performance properties of the literary recital to consider how Mason came to use it in the New Zealand context, I am going to look at the way that Dickens in particular, as the most successful exponent of literary recital, comes to use the hybridity of the literary recital in the context of Victorian England. This establishes a precedent by which to consider Mason's use of the form, and the differences in content that allowed him to exploit the hybridity of the literary recital to reach a New Zealand audience in 1959. What do the roles that Mason assumes as a solo performer tell us about the transition from a colonial perspective to a post-colonial one? What are the potentials and limitations, in terms of theatre, suggested by Mason's representation of this transition in a solo performance?

The literary recital is a hybrid form. Poised between literature and theatre, it gained popularity in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century as an alternative form of entertainment to the regular theatre, considered at the time to be a place of ill repute. The use of theatres as a place of business for prostitutes was the main reason for the theatre's bad reputation, as well as the fact that many actors used prostitution as a means of survival. There was also a historical prejudice against the theatre, one that Jonas Barish in his study *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (1981) traces back to Plato – a mistrust based on the mimetic quality of theatre as it comes to disrupt attempts to present stable and fixed ideas of truth and reality. Barish argues that throughout the history of Western culture a prejudice has prevailed against the mirroring qualities of theatre, including the theatre of a highly stratified and morally rigid Victorian society in which the literary recital had its heyday.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Barish's discussion of Dickens, (1981, 369-375).

Historians suggest that literature, on the other hand, and the reading of novels in particular, was considered a more worthy pursuit in Victorian society than theatre-going. In *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (1998), Deborah Vlock describes how reading for an audience became popular in the drawing rooms and living rooms of Victorian England, hosts regaling guests with poetry and prose from the latest and greatest poets and writers of the time (Vlock 1998, 56-59). Eventually, well-known writers and poets decided to take to the stage themselves and present their work to an appreciative public. In this way, it is possible to see that the literary recital brought theatre closer to home, turning the stage into a larger drawing room, and creating a sense of intimacy or closeness with the audience that was unlike the theatre of the time. In doing so, the literary recital offered an experience that played on the sanctity of home making this kind of entertainment more acceptable than the theatre.

At the same time, it appears that the resemblance of these forms to the sermon or the lecture – prominent thinkers of the time were also known to present their work on stage – also appealed to the high-minded Victorians. Vlock suggests:

Public readings represented a legitimization of performance, drawing it closer to the more 'serious', the purer, literary genres; such modified performance privileged text and voice but rejected the extravagances, the baroque complexities of detail, typical of standard theatrical entertainment. (1998, 60)

The literary recital offered a more direct exchange with the audience compared to the pretence of role-play between actors in the theatre. In particular, it seems that the style of melodrama prevalent at the time was considered objectionable because the spectator was positioned as voyeur to a private scene unfolding. The reading of literature direct to the audience, on the other hand, established a more sanitised relationship between performer and spectator than theatre.

Compared to the theatre, the literary recital was also a more sanitary option because of the difference implied by venue. Normally, the performances took place in halls or public buildings. Recitalists would not perform in theatres or venues where their reputations might be called into question. They would wear formal eveningwear (tails) and would perform from a lectern or with a chair and table. Upon the table, books were often piled from which the performer would recite their own work and that of others that they admired. Writers and thinkers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Makepeace Thackeray and William Hazlitt all took their work onstage, using it as a platform for their ideas and work. Indeed, the term 'platform' became the common phrase to describe such performances. This was especially the case when the literary recital came to be performed in America. Here, organizations such as the Lyceum Bureau established venues and paved the way for solo performers touring to and around the United States, and were followed by the popular Chautauqua Assemblies that still exist in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Tours across the Atlantic, in both directions, by many well-known writers, poets and thinkers became increasingly prevalent in the latter half of the nineteenth century, introducing different work and ideas to the respective societies.

In this way, the literary recital was a form that allowed a performer to travel in search of an audience, and, once found, the form allowed the writer, in performance, to reach his public through direct address (Schlicke 1985, 244). The direct address of the literary recital had the potential to allow a greater intimacy with an audience, an intimacy that the writer did not have during the writing process. By the same token, the audience were allowed access to favourite writers, coming together with others in the audience who shared the same passion. These are all features that Mason would

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<sup>3</sup> For an examination of the American Lyceum and Chautauqua Platform and Dickens' influence of these movements, see Gentile (1989).

exploit in the New Zealand context. Before considering Mason however, I want to look closely at the specific example of Dickens and how he came to create a more theatrical literary recital than other 'readers' as his kind of theatrical performance comes closer to the performer-spectator dynamic that Mason would create in *The End of the Golden Weather*.

Dickens is the best known performer of the literary recital. His tours to America between 1858 and 1870 caused the kind of public adoration that would become commonplace with pop stars in the next century, but were unprecedented before him. In *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (1985), Paul Schlicke suggests that this notoriety came from being able to exploit the positioning of the form between literature and theatre (Schlicke 1985, 244). That is, Dickens' performances moved towards utilising the inherent theatricality of the literary recital allowing the audience the thrill of theatre without the stigma usually attached to its attendance. Dickens became famed in Britain and, later, in America for the unusual degree of dramatic flair that he brought to his performances. Schlicke suggests he moved away from reciting his prose and came to impersonate characters from his literature with changes in voice and gesture – as a form that was not-quite-theatre, but not-quite-not-theatre he appealed to a broad audience that included a mixture of ages, genders, and classes that were segregated by the conventional forms of entertainment (1985, 244).

Historians suggest that Dickens' solo performances reflected a love affair with the theatre that he had had from a young age. As a regular patron of theatre, Dickens had briefly considered a career as an actor and had gone so far as to make an appointment to audition for a major theatre before illness prevented him. He eventually decided to turn his attention to writing, as a journalist and illustrator and then as an author of fiction. Nevertheless, he maintained a connection with the

theatre, working as an actor, director, and deviser with amateur theatre companies as well as writing plays and having his own prose adapted for the stage.

It is, then, less surprising that when Dickens came to perform alone he was influenced by well-known actors that had impressed him from his frequent trips to the theatre. That is, he seems to have been influenced more by the actors that he admired than by his literary colleagues who had performed on stage. Specifically, it seems that Dickens' solo performances were influenced by actors Albert Smith (1816-1860) and Charles Mathews (1776-1835), who had gained renown for their comic solo performances. These solo performers combined stories from their travels (travelogues) and experiences, representing the characters they had met and the events they had seen.

Schlicke suggests that in Mathews in particular, Dickens found a style of performing that he wanted to emulate. When Dickens came to create his own solo performances, it was Mathews' "At Homes" – a combination of songs, impersonations and anecdotal stories – that served as a source of inspiration for the shaping of his performances. Mathews, a successful comic actor, had developed his solo performances as a result of "frustration with the limited scope of roles offered by regular stage comedy, a desire to exploit the distinctiveness of his individual talents, and an accident which left him partially lame" (Schlicke 1985, 234). By the time Dickens created his solo performances, Mathews' career was at an end; the height of Mathews' popularity had come when Dickens was a teenager. It seems that at the pinnacle of Mathews' success he toured to America in 1822, a feat that Dickens would later come to emulate in the American tours that made him a superstar.

According to Schlicke, Dickens was successful in adapting the features of Mathews' performance style that were most useful for reaching an audience (1985,

237). Dickens did not wear make-up, a costume, or have a set as Mathews did, but he used the general structure and performance tricks of his favourite actor. Like Mathews, for example, Dickens would personally address the audience as himself at the beginning of the performance in an attempt to build a rapport and intimacy with the audience. Schlicke suggests that Mathews and Dickens both attempted to project “images of themselves as genial men wishing unaffectedly to offer amusement to their audiences” (1985, 237). By keeping his own personality as the unifying feature of the performance, Dickens learnt from Mathews a way to thrill the audience when, invariably, there would be changes of role and character during the performance. Schlicke says that what especially impressed audiences were the distinctive characters Dickens created, recognisable people rather than stock types or caricature (1985, 237). Furthermore, the rapid changes of character by Dickens as a solo performer created a virtuosity that thrilled audiences.

According to historians, different but related aims lay behind Dickens’ theatrical representation of his literature. Schlicke claims that Dickens took to the stage alone for reasons that went beyond his life-long desire to be an actor. He argues that the ability of Dickens to present distinctive characters and situations meant that the performances were shaped and directed so that they “were not merely frivolous diversions, but offered contents of significance” and “social satire”. Schlicke says that the literary recitals led the audience “on to a fuller and more generous conception of the world they lived in” (1985, 239-40). He implies that as a solo performer Dickens had the potential to create a live and immediate relationship with the audience by engaging with the world that they shared – a way of creating a sense of community by re-presenting characters and circumstances from his literature that were rooted in a social and political context that the audience could recognize as their own. As we

shall see shortly, the community building properties suggested by Dickens' solo performances would be exploited by Mason, albeit in socio-historical circumstances where a sense of national identity was being newly discovered rather than affirmed and critiqued.

Other critics, such as John Gentile in *Cast of One* (1989), have argued that solo performance was a way for Dickens to increase his popularity in England. Gentile suggests that Dickens had always come to 'find' the characters of his fiction by acting them out for family and friends (Gentile 1989, 14). This implies that Dickens' literary recitals were simply an extension of his enjoyment of performance – of having an audience. Gentile argues that the selection of his most popular works for performance, rather than the likes of *Our Mutual Friend* and *Bleak House* “upon which his literary reputation now rests”, suggests that for Dickens the performances were mainly an exercise in increasing his fame (1989, 14). Yet, Dickens was already incredibly wealthy and perhaps the most well known figure in Victorian England. Therefore, it seems likely that, despite his publishers' fears that the histrionics of their star author would tarnish his reputation as a writer, Dickens was sincere in his belief that his literary recitals would expand and extend his social aims as a journalist and writer of literature. Schlicke quotes Dickens as saying:

[Public Reading] necessitates no departure whatever from the chosen pursuits of my life... I proceed to read this little book, quite as composedly as I might proceed to write it, or to publish it in any other way. (Dickens qtd in Schlicke 1985, 226)

According to Schlicke, the overall intent behind Dickens' previous outlets as a journalist, illustrator and writer of literature had been a belief that his work should offer sustenance to an audience of readers by offering stories that would uplift as well as criticise, alleviate as well as castigate (1985, 226). In this way, it may be that by representing his own work on stage Dickens hoped to bring out (to point towards)



those elements in his work that might be relevant to the lives of his audience. This idea is supported by the fact that Dickens was frustrated with previous attempts by others to adapt his work for the stage. He felt that these adaptations tended to “vulgarise” the characters and thus “destroy or weaken” the power (and presumably the social aims) of his writing (Schlicke 1985, 233). It seems that Dickens attempted to bring the characters of his fiction closer to the reality of everyday life, including perhaps, those works that had a reputation as ‘great’ literature. By representing his characters in person, he could affect readings of his creations according to the particular time and place in which he was performing.

Dickens had particular concerns for the working class in an industrial age where life was grim and unrelenting. In his readings, Dickens not only attempted to call attention to the plight of the working class; he also sought to relieve some of the strain by offering those stories of his such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Little Dorrit* and *Doctor Marigold*, which offered “moral uplift” and increased “the stock of human sympathy” (Schlicke 1985, 239-40). That he was intent that not only the upper and middle classes should enjoy his performances was illustrated by Dickens’ insistence that the working classes be given affordable tickets. He also toured the provinces, something he was in a much better position to do as a solo performer than in his previous experiences in the theatre. In this way, it seems that Dickens become a solo performer in order to reach a wide audience and represent for them work that might be entertaining as well as socially significant. The direct relationship between him and the audience created the kind of community feeling that Dickens believed vital to a healthy society. Dickens’ incarnation as a solo performer seems to have been directed towards bringing an audience of different classes together “like a group of friends” (Schlicke 1985, 227).

This latter reference to the communal aspects offered in performance raises another compelling (and perhaps the most tangible) motivation to Dickens' decision to perform solo. In *The Dickens Aesthetic*, Richard Lettis surveys a number of letters written by Dickens before he embarked on his career as a soloist to reveal an increasingly lonely figure having difficulty with the solitary process of writing. Lettis suggests that this was one of a number of indicators that Dickens was feeling increasingly depressed and isolated in his writing career and that this was why his literary recitals took over as the major preoccupation for the last twelve years of his life (Lettis 1989, 72). For a man who clearly enjoyed the collective experience of working in the theatre and performing at home for friends, it seems that writing alone had become too taxing on Dickens' gregarious nature. It is possible that Dickens' own sense of isolation and depression led him to solo performance as a way to commune with his public and, in the process, he alleviated some of their feelings of isolation as well.

Dickens' use of the literary recital to overcome a sense of isolation and create a feeling of community offers a useful counterpoint to discuss Mason's use of the form beginning in New Zealand in 1959. There are parallels between Dickens and Mason as writers whose love for the theatre and performing had led, initially, to frustration. Like Dickens, Mason seems to have found unlikely success and the fulfilment of his social aims to reach a larger community in the versatility of the solo form. Yet the circumstances by which Mason came to perform alone – the frustration that made solo performance a necessity for him – suggests the lack of a sense of community on a level that is culturally based rather than the socially oriented aspects of Dickens' isolation. Whereas Dickens turned to solo performance as an already established writer in a well-established culture, Mason was working as a relative

novice in a culture that was slowly coming to an awareness of self. That is to say, if Dickens used solo performance as a way to critique and maintain the values that he saw as central to the society in which he lived, Mason used the form as a way of *finding* values or ideas that were held in common with a community that was searching for a sense of identity. I want to explore this critical difference in order to explain why Mason's adaptation of the form made famous by Dickens was so useful in the process of community building in a post-colonial New Zealand.

I begin by considering the circumstances that led Mason to solo performance and the socio-historical context that made this foray so successful. It is worth noting that Mason had some success with the form of the short story and this would later be the basis for his success in solo performance. *The End of the Golden Weather* combines his successful short story 'Summer's End' (1952) – featuring the friendship between the boy and Firpo – with a series of talks that he had put together for a radio programme on New Zealand writers and their lives. With a change of name to 'The Made Man', this story became the second half to *The End of the Golden Weather*. Mason preceded 'The Made Man' with his recollections of growing up in a coastal town, complete with characters, rituals and events that were distinctive to New Zealand in the 1930s.

In many ways, his exploration in the short story form might be seen as a precedent to his later decision to go solo. Lydia Wevers points out that the short story has enjoyed "privileged status" in New Zealand, and "more than the novel, [the short story has] been the genre in which preoccupations of a colonial and post-colonial literature have worked themselves out" (Wevers 1998, 245). She adds that the form may best reflect the breaking away to form a post-colonial identity because:

[T]he problematic questions of separation, race, culture, and identity which constrain and shape an emerging national literature can be more comfortably articulated in a genre which does not imply resolution. (1998, 246)

Such a notion is something that may also be considered in relation to solo performance, where the idea of resolution is perhaps less expected than in a conventional 'play'. Wevers observations suggest that the short story allows for experimentation, which, as we shall see, is also evident in solo performance compared to conventional theatre. She points out that the short story was used by the likes of Katherine Mansfield and Frank Sargeson as a way of exploring and playing with literary styles and forms to find a voice of their own. Mansfield's short stories reflect a generation of New Zealanders that are still very much of a colonial mindset – England is still thought of as home. Mansfield moved to England to join a larger, established community of writers. Sargeson was central to the next generation of writers – now referred to as the 'cultural nationalists' – who attempted to adapt forms and styles from elsewhere to reflect and construct a distinctly New Zealand community.

Mason, however, was more determined to establish a distinctive New Zealand voice through theatre rather than literature. The biographies of Mason by Howard McNaughton (1976) and David Dowling (1982), refer to a young man who briefly considered a career as a playwright in England (he was stationed there during the Second World War), before he made the decision to return to New Zealand, aiming, explicitly, to carve out an indigenous New Zealand theatre. To begin with, Mason worked with the Unity Theatre in Wellington – a cooperative that reflected Mason's belief in socialist principles as the basis for an emerging New Zealand society. Later, he became involved with the New Zealand Players who, for seven-years, toured around New Zealand. For both companies, Mason dedicated himself primarily as a

playwright but, as is the way with such small groups, found himself doing a bit of everything including acting, directing and set building. Simultaneously, he earned money through his published criticism of theatre and music (he was a gifted pianist). The various skills that Mason picked up in the theatre would become invaluable when he turned to solo performance.

Through his experiences with the Unity Theatre (*The Evening Paper*, 1953) and the New Zealand Players (*The Pohutukawa Tree*, 1957), it seems that Mason was searching for a way to overcome the resistance to New Zealand imagery on stage. McNaughton's comments about the context that led Mason to solo performance suggests that such resistance was the consequence of a culture still finding its feet:

All of Mason's plays were written between 1956 and 1968, a period in which the New Zealand stage offered few production opportunities. Such professional theatre as existed was tentative or weak, and Mason's faith in amateur companies had declined after Unity began to lose impetus. (McNaughton 1998, 342)

Mason's correspondence at the time, recorded in *Every Kind of Weather* (1986), suggests that his experience with Unity and the New Zealand Players, made him realize that New Zealand theatre reflected the self-consciousness of the culture, unconfident about who they were. He could also see that other writers in the burgeoning field of New Zealand literature who had also been attempting to create theatre work based in the New Zealand experience, for instance Allen Curnow (*The Axe*, 1949), were not faring any better. It seems that audiences had grown accustomed to the idea, since the establishing of the new colonies in the 1840s, that theatre came via the regular tours by professional companies and performers from England. It was these performances that were held aloft as 'culture' in the minds of a community that was only beginning the process of working out who they might be beyond the apron strings of Mother England. In this way, theatre continued to act as a colonial tool in

establishing English values, ideas and customs in a far off and distant land, a feat aided and abetted by an enthusiastic amateur tradition that sprang up to fill the lull between tours, playing the popular favourites of the West End.

The emulating of established models points to the passive response to isolation that I discussed in the introduction. That is, the attempts to come to terms with the search for a collective post-colonial identity would sometimes appear to result in (re)building a culture that continues the colonial structures set in place – building a new England. In the context of the times, the attempts by Mason and others to stage New Zealand material might be considered an attempt to build a new New Zealand – their attempts to stage New Zealand material went against the norm of re-staging work that was from England.

On the other hand, Mason responds to a sense of cultural isolation by turning to colonial forms as the basis for a New Zealand theatre. Mason's attempts to align New Zealand content with the form that a New Zealand theatre audience recognised as theatre was not well received. An example is *The Pohutukawa Tree*, which was staged for the first time in 1957. This was the first of a series of plays that, together, Mason called *The Healing Arch: Five Plays on Maori Themes* (published together in 1987). Although *The Pohutukawa Tree* was the first of the series that Mason came to write, he later wrote a prequel called *Hongi*, which took place in the colonial era. *The Pohutukawa Tree*, on the other hand, takes place just after the Second World War. It introduces for the first time the mythical Te Parenga that he would later revisit in *The End of the Golden Weather*. With *The Pohutukawa Tree*, Mason represents the story of the last Maori inhabitants of Te Parenga, an elderly woman (Aroha, which in Maori means love) and her two teenage children. Mason reflects a crisis in New Zealand identity by representing an ailing indigenous culture. The crisis is represented through

the character of Aroha who holds onto the Christian values instilled in her by the colonial past, and the younger generation who want to return to the traditional Maori values of the marae. The performance ends with the death of Aroha at the same time as the branch of a pohutukawa tree, hanging over the stage during the play, is lowered to the ground.

The ending of the play is a provocation to a post-colonial New Zealand culture searching for a sense of identity. Mason seems to be suggesting a coming together of Maori and Pakeha, perhaps as a way of healing the fragmentation in both communities as they search for a new identity in a post-colonial era. This “healing” takes place over the other plays in the series, as a Maori culture slowly starts to get back on its feet. In *Awatea*, the final play in the series, a symbolic passing of the torch from Mason to a reemerging Maori culture in the 1970s is evident in the decision of a young imprisoned Maori to become a writer. Mason also believed that these plays could be the origins of a bicultural theatre by incorporating Maori performance forms such as haka and waiata into the structure of a conventional Western forms (Mason 1986, 268).

However, it seems that Mason was unsatisfied with the reception to his play beyond its initial showing by the New Zealand Players in 1957 – the play has rarely been staged since. Perhaps this is because the staging of local material within the colonial model of theatre provoked a sense of post-colonial anxiety about the distance between a former home and the new one that is in the process of being constructed. That is, Mason’s attempts at conventional dramas such as *The Pohutukawa Tree* stirs up an adolescent-like embarrassment at seeing images of self and hearing local voices on stage; it only served to illustrate the sense of distance (and reaffirm a sense of isolation) in relation to the older established models it emulated. A bemused Mason

could not understand why the play was accorded more interest in England than New Zealand, where a television version of the play was produced for the BBC in 1959 (Anderson 1982, interview on VHS). It stands to reason, however, that to a firmly established English culture with a recent imperial gaze, Mason's work would be something of a novelty, the addition of an exotic location from the edge of the world represented within a recognisable framework.

*The End of the Golden Weather*, on the other hand, reached a wide New Zealand audience in a way that his previous plays had not. Before he came to perform in 1959, Mason felt that he had tried everything to create a New Zealand theatre but had "come to the end of the road" (Mason 1980a, 194). That Mason came to perform *The End of the Golden Weather* all over New Zealand for as long as he did, suggests that this performance managed to speak to a local audience about the experience of being a New Zealander. In particular, his recollection of a childhood spent growing up in a beachside community, describing this community and enacting the characters, seems to have struck a chord with a New Zealand audience because it presented images that were held in common. By representing his own personal experiences through the form of literary recital, Mason seems to have exploited the theatricality of the form, much as Dickens had, to bring to life characters and places that might be recognised by a New Zealand audience searching for a sense of post-colonial identity.

The reasons for Mason's successful adaptation of a colonial form to the New Zealand environment are several and related. To start with, there are the simple advantages that come with the manoeuvrability and adaptability of a solo performance. After the difficulties that came with producing *The Pohutukawa Tree*, Mason recognized in Emlyn Williams' performances something that might work well in the particular context of New Zealand. A man standing alone on stage with only a



table and a chair could be a form that avoided the difficulties of touring conventional theatre: ensemble casts, large sets and costumes and so on. He had only himself to rely on to create the work, which, as mentioned, was already to hand in the form of his previously published short story and radio talks. Mason referred to his process of creating *The End of the Golden Weather* in recognizably mythic terms, tying into the pioneer trope upon which New Zealand was founded:

Well, I'm a kiwi born and bred. We're at our best in a corner: good improvisers, bad experts, as an American critic once said of us. No theatrical framework? Right, then, I would create my own. Touring a play is expensive? Then cut to the minimum, table and chair. Scenery is costly to make and cumbersome to cart around? Do it all with words: appeal directly to the audience's imagination. Casts are expensive? Be your own. Do all forty parts. Play anywhere, in any circumstances, to any audience. (Mason 1981a, 195)

These observations were made in hindsight. Mason scripted these remarks for a television interview to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> performance of *The End of the Golden Weather*. When he began performing, it seems that Mason, like Dickens, was dubious as to whether this kind of performance would last for long, and he considered giving up, not just *The End of the Golden Weather*, but the whole, difficult enterprise of creating theatre in New Zealand (Mason 1981a, 195). This was especially the case when Williams was disparaging of Mason's radical attempts to present New Zealand material in a form that he considered high art. Mason says that when he approached the actor after his performance and told him of his ideas, Williams was surprised that someone should attempt to replicate a success founded on the shoulders of literary giants such as Dickens and Thomas. According to Mason, Williams said: "Yet here, little you at the backyard of the world, dare to assume that you can not only hold an audience by yourself, but you write your script as well!" (1981a, 196). Mason said that reviewers in New Zealand agreed with Williams, claiming that New Zealand could not yet "produce an Emyln Williams" (1981a, 196). He argued that he was not

trying to be anybody else; he says he just wanted to prove to himself that he had a “calling for theatre and that this calling would at length be recognised, so that I could give my life and best energies to it” (1981a, 194).

Despite the disapproval that Mason says accompanied his early performances it seems that the not-quiteness of the form, much as it had created Dickens’ success a century earlier, allowed Mason to reach a wide and diverse New Zealand audience. Like Dickens, Mason created a performance that sat in between recognisable ideas of theatre and literature and presented something not created previously, and, most importantly in Mason’s case, he created a performance for an audience that had not existed before. I mean by this that Mason managed to appeal to a broad audience that included established theatre audiences and those that were not familiar with theatre. In the New Zealand context, Mason also exploited the direct address that had allowed Dickens to meet his audience as if they were “a group of friends”, inspiring a dialogue about what was held in common.

In other words, a form that had developed in between recognised ideas of literature and theatre – appearing in line with presentational forms such as the lecture or sermon – was tailor-made for a post-colonial audience similarly in between. A form that is not-quite-theatre, not-quite-not-theatre was a way of meeting and responding to an audience that was searching for a post-colonial identity. Furthermore, the passage from adolescence to adulthood experienced by the young Mason could be aligned with the pubescent political identity of New Zealand. As part of a relatively young culture searching for its own stories, going back to childhood took on a special significance, Mason’s personal history coming to stand in for a collective cultural history.

Perhaps Mason could only come to appreciate the suitability of the solo performance to the New Zealand situation retrospectively, because it took a while to get used to the particular dynamic of the performer-spectator relationship of the literary recital. He eventually came to see that in creating the 'set' with word and gesture, he could appeal directly to the audience's imagination with images that were familiar to them as Pakeha New Zealanders, referring to it as a kind of communion:

What is left are the occasions when you have a wonderful rapport with an audience. When you and they cease to have any kind of boundary. When you are communicating in a way that makes you one continuum; that's where it worked. It was wonderful when it happened. (Anderson 1982, television interview)

Solo performance allowed for the possibility of a far more direct and intimate relationship with the audience compared to conventional theatre with its tendency to pretend that the audience was not there. It is possible that the acknowledgment by the performer made the audience aware of themselves as a collective. This visibility as a collective helped in the community building process as the audience were helped to see that they were not alone. In the context of 1950s New Zealand, the directness of solo performance takes on significance in a culture uncertain about its identity but looking to discuss who they might be as a collective. Rather than the usual circumstance of a dialogue and conflict taking place between actors on stage, as in, say, *The Pohutukawa Tree*, the direct address of solo performance invites a dynamic exchange between performer and spectator, and, possibly, a tension between them regarding the nature of identity – a tension perhaps between the views that New Zealand might be a new England and those that are looking to build a separate New Zealand identity.

In a later solo performance, *Not Christmas But Guy Fawkes* (1976), Mason suggested that just such a conversation had been something he had striven for from a

young age, hiding in a flax bush creating imaginary worlds while his parents and their friends occupied the adjacent lawn:

We *are* the world we live in. I in my flax bush and the people on the lawn form a context: if I could not communicate with them, it was because they refused communication with me, or the likes of me. And the reasons for this refusal have become the mainspring of my work. (Mason 1981, 93)

This image evokes the sense of isolation that typifies the New Zealand experience, and reflects Mason's experience in particular. Mason's desire to "step out of the flax bush" and confront those on the manicured (English) lawn evokes the image of another kind of native, a native that is looking to find out who he might be by creating a dialogue with his audience (community).

Mason's use of the literary recital to search for a national identity is further illuminated with a comparison to Dylan Thomas, another well-known literary recitalist. Thomas, a great exponent of the literary recital in his own right, was particularly noted for his celebration and determined championing of a distinctive Welsh identity within the wider hegemonic schema of Britain, the content of his poetry evoking particularly local sights and experiences. Yet Thomas' career as a performer began with appearances on London radio in which he presented his own plays and worked as a voice for others, and, most famously, following in the footsteps of Dickens, his tours to the United States in the 1950s. In these performances, Thomas established himself as one of the giants of modern literature, drawing a diverse range of audiences, his deep resonant voice belting out the poetry of others as well as his own, and his witty, often lewd, asides giving life to his work in a way that only performance could. However, these performances were more about establishing Thomas' identity to an international audience than pursuing a sense of community by performing for Welsh audiences. Gentile, referring to a number of Thomas biographies, suggests that solo performance was a "means of escape from his life in

England” (1989, 181), and that he played on his reputation as a hard-drinking womaniser to establish his identity in a wider literary community. What made Mason’s performance of *The End of the Golden Weather* so extraordinary in New Zealand was the way it actually played a tangible role in *creating* community. Mason did tour to Edinburgh in 1963, the first such experience for New Zealand theatre and the beginning of a trend that continues to the present day. However, the true impact of *The End of the Golden Weather* was at its most poignant at a flax roots level in New Zealand. Being able to move easily through town and settlement as well as different venues, and having a more intimate relationship with the audience than conventional theatre, saw *The End of the Golden Weather* travel in a way previously unachieved by any other kind of theatre in New Zealand. The popular success of *The End of the Golden Weather* snowballed, especially after funding came from Community Arts Service (CAS), an organization that funded tours of opera, theatre ballet and music recitals to outlying areas before the advent of television made such ventures unnecessary (or unwanted). Mason toured to Wellington and Christchurch, performing in such venues as Christchurch’s Provincial Chambers – a building that emulates the traditional structures of England, and may have made Mason feel as if he *were* Dickens performing at the high end of culture.

However, it was the community halls, churches, RSAs, pubs and schools of the outlying areas where *The End of the Golden Weather* seems to have been most at home. That is, the solo format was ideal for the places in which the remote communities of New Zealand gathered. Mason often recounted how the manoeuvrability of the solo form allowed him to make contact with a diverse range of audiences that were unaccustomed to performance, except for vague notions of high art that were considered threatening and unrelated to everyday New Zealand life

(Mason 1981a, 203-211). Rather, he says, the directness of the solo form allowed him to reach audiences in places that were physically and geographically remote as well as socially and culturally isolated. In this way, Mason continues and goes beyond the kind of in-roads made by his literary colleagues who had introduced, and tried to combat, this sense of isolation through figures such as the 'man alone'. Being able to move through settlements, towns and cities, as well as having a direct relationship with the audience, allowed Mason to bring together a group of people within the same space and represent a place, events and people that were familiar to them as New Zealanders.

Mason recalled, for example, two particular meetings with members of his audience that illustrated to him the extraordinary impact of *The End of the Golden Weather*. The first was with a surly farmer with little time for high culture, but who changed his mind after seeing *The End of the Golden Weather*. He tells Mason that it "spoke" to him and "opened up my life, things I'd forgotten" (Mason 1981a, 207). This points to the possibilities of a theatre that relates directly to the experience of those in the community in which it is situated. It also points to the kind of isolation that is caused by the strong masculine ethos that, in New Zealand, seems to hold such communities together, and that this ethos tends to repress the personal and the emotive. Mason suggests that for the laconic almost monosyllabic male inhabitants of rural communities, where understatement and stoicism are highly valued, the images of childhood evoked by Mason seem to have been a catalyst for unlocking memories and emotions repressed by the dominant masculine ethos of the culture. Again this appears to have been the case when Mason encountered a young hunter – a man who spent most of his time in the high country, alone, but was touched when he heard a recording of *The End of the Golden Weather*. He tells Mason that his story a New

Zealand childhood taught him “summer is not just a season, but a climate of the mind” (Mason, 1981a, 211).

At the same time, there is the sense of the ‘missionary’ in the way Mason describes these encounters. Mason’s description of his treks out into the wilderness of New Zealand culture evoke the image of the missionaries who were charged with bringing ‘civilisation’ to the barbaric natives, and keeping in line those who had strayed from the ‘civilised’ lands of Europe. Mason is not as pious as one might expect of a missionary, but in his attempt to show the maturing of Pakeha culture he positions himself as a kind of authority figure, *teaching* a largely uneducated public about the merits of theatre. This may also reflect Mason’s role as a noted music and theatre critic in New Zealand. The appeal to high art standards that threads its way through much of Mason’s criticism, also emanates from the magisterial tone he takes up to describe his encounters with the farmer and hunter.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the way he refers to his meeting with the young hunter suggests the older, wiser Patriarch encouraging the shy, naïve, “hooer”. Mason implies that the young hunter, like his younger self in *The End of the Golden Weather*, becomes aware of himself as a man, and, in doing so, comes to position himself as the voice of authority.

This suggests that with a colonial form such as the literary recital there is the echo of a colonial voice. On the one hand, the ‘poverty’ of the table and chair may imply something tangible about the potentiality of New Zealand where the land and identity are yet to be constructed from imagination. Mason’s simulation of the literary form sees his attempt to *explore* Pakeha identity affected by a pressing need for an authoritative voice to *define* that identity. My sense of the tone that Mason takes up in his recollection of these incidents is based partly on the way they are written, but,

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<sup>4</sup> For a selection of Mason’s criticism, see *Every Kind of Weather* (1986).

even more so, on the voice that Mason assumes in the audio recordings of his solo performances. Although the series of voices presented in the audio narrative of *The End of the Golden Weather* may be seen as an attempt to enhance and distinguish the New Zealand accent of the young Mason, his assumption of an archetypal English voice as narrator indicates a desire for this story to be understood as part of a wider English story. As with ‘received pronunciation’ common at the time, Mason’s simulation of the literary voice of Dickens and Williams reveals a Pakeha desire for New Zealand to be seen to have come of age in the British context.

In order to discuss the way in which Mason positions himself and the experience of living in New Zealand, I turn now to consider Mason’s use of voice in the audio recording he made of *The End of the Golden Weather* (1981b). What comes through in these recordings is an irony: that in attempting to settle Pakeha, Mason represents an unsettled and unsettling constituency. In his initial address to the audience that I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, Mason tells the audience that he is going to represent “that territory of the heart we call childhood” (1981b/1981a, 3). In this light, the heart is a symbolic receptacle of memory, which, being shared by everyone, means that this story is meant to transcend definitions of place. Mason seems to appeal to a humanist instinct to universalise when he suggests that this story can be understood by anybody with a heart and a childhood. By framing the story within the generic conventions of the ‘coming of age’ narrative, Mason indicates a desire to transcend local references in order to appeal to a universal audience, as much evoking *Oliver Twist* or *Tom Sawyer* as any particular New Zealand boy. Throughout the narrative, Mason takes on a series of voices to show the growing nativeness of the young boy, yet the characters sound – both in the way Mason describes them and the



voice he uses to delineate character – like they could just as easily have been at home in one of Dickens’ or Mark Twain’s stories of boys on their way to becoming men.

To reflect the uniqueness of New Zealand, Mason refers to local sites. The way he pronounces, almost sings, “Te Parenga” as the invented Maori title for his childhood home suggests a way of making this place unique. When Mason’s lilting voice caresses the words such as “Rangitoto” or “Pohutukawa” there is the sense of an exotic otherness that helps to ground him as another kind of native – an attempt to naturalise a fledgling Pakeha environment. Mason says he named the beach Te Parenga because he liked the sound of the word rather than for its meaning.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, he writes over the Maori history as well as his own – the actual name of his childhood home is Takapuna. As with the reference to Rangitoto, Mason seems unaware or unconcerned with the Maori mythology that is connected to these places. It is not as important as the exotic sound of the word and site. While Mason is sympathetic to Maori – wanting to see a coming together of Maori and Pakeha – his reference to Maori culture in *The End of the Golden Weather* suggests the motivation is to create a past for Pakeha by re-mythologizing a distinctive site in New Zealand.

In his description of the pohutukawa in *The End of the Golden Weather*, it is possible to witness the Pakeha author caught between the “king and queen” over the sea (“two squashed rock pillars with steps cut in their side for diving in the summer” (1981b/1981a, 3) and the pohutukawa, a symbol of Maori on the shore. It is not simply in name that the pohutukawa may be seen as a symbol of Maori indigeneity. As I suggested earlier, in *The Pohutukawa Tree* Mason represents the final Maori resident of Te Parenga dying alongside a pohutukawa tree planted by the first Maori residents of Te Parenga. This ominous allusion to the departure of Maori is

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<sup>5</sup> Mason was pleased to discover that the actual meaning of the word is ‘river bank’, which, with dramatic license, could be applied to the environment he describes (Mason, 1981a, 199).

maintained in *The End of the Golden Weather*. Mason's description of the trees evokes images of an ancient culture that is "faded", "pained" and "tortured" (1981b/1981a, 3). In this allusion to Maori culture, Mason appeals to the audience's sense of a "noble" race dying like a "fire at dusk" in a way that emulates the fiery departure of the Gods in Wagner's 'Ring Cycle' or the passing of the Elves in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1981b/1981a, 3). As with these Nordic based myths, Mason appeals to romantic visions that imply an ancient connection to the land, to counteract the sense that contemporary society is dislocated. There is the sense of a nostalgia for a past that is not quite his, but which he claims as long as it remains in the past. Does this, then, suggest that the native must die for the settler to thrive in his place? If the native does not die, will the settler remain frozen in place?

In contrast to the depiction of an older Maori culture in *The Pohutukawa Tree*, in *The End of the Golden Weather* Mason portrays a Pakeha culture caught in a growth spurt, pimples and all. Mason describes a shallow Pakeha culture, when he tells his audience that *beside* the majesty of the pohutukawa trees, "the houses of Te Parenga have a skimped look"(1981b/1981a, 3). In relation to the naturalness of Maori, Mason projects a Pakeha culture that is one-dimensional and incongruous against the land: "an *intermittent rash* of shops on the margins", "*unlovely* bungalows of wood and tin" and "a *clot* of buildings" (1981b/1981a, 4; emphasis not in the original). It is as if this settlement is unable to establish permanence on land, a beachhead perhaps, but one that is not designed for long-time residence in this place. Likewise, the characters that inhabit Mason's beach (a "half world") seem to be neither here nor there, "as though the full light were not their element" (1981b/1981a, 8). On one side are the representatives of law and order, Reverend Thirle and Sergeant Robinson, who, like Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, represent the staid

and out-of-place Victorian values of a former home. What Mason seems to be suggesting is that some of the baggage heaped upon the beach by the settler ancestors, especially the puritanical elements that seem so out of place, need to be left with the other flotsam and jetsam to be carried back out to sea. On the other side, the options do not seem any better for the established inhabitants of the beach. Miss Effie Brett and Firpo, are “not all there” (1981b/1981a, 49), child-like, mad, trapped in their attempts to live up to ‘grown-up’ models from elsewhere, perhaps a foretelling of both the hope and hindrance of a liminal post-colonial identity.

Looking into an unsettled past at a series of unsettling characters accentuates a solid footing of Pakeha in the present. Mason’s recollection of the 1930s highlights to an audience in 1959 (and beyond) how much Pakeha culture has grown in that time. The growing-up of Pakeha culture is commented upon directly when Mason describes the British settlers. He looks on his cultural past almost as if he were Maori. He reverses the Victorian narrative in which the white man (à la Robinson Crusoe) peeks through the bushes at the native other. His past is strange and mystifying almost to the point of being completely Other as he says, “men dressed as chimneys, in top hats and black stove pipes, women dressed as great bells, tiny feet as clappers” (1981b/1981a, 4). This establishes a contrast between Mason the New Zealander and his British settler ancestors, suggesting a growing awareness and development of the Pakeha identity. The series of episodes that introduce particular domestic rituals (‘Sunday at Te Parenga’ and ‘Christmas at Te Parenga’) and the ramifications of wider political events (‘The Queen Street Riots’ brought about by the Great Depression), suggests a tension with the cultural maturation of New Zealand, poised to go in a number of directions as the golden weather of youth comes to an end.

Ultimately, the coming of age of the young Mason may be seen to signify the coming to maturity of Pakeha culture. This is alluded to by the title of the second half of the performance, *The Made Man*. The young Mason is pitched between adult voices that speak only of impossibilities, and Firpo, the “not all there” grown man, who, in his desire to make himself into an Olympic Champion, inspires the young Mason to be the master of his own destiny:

I reach the beach and march briskly along. A deep voice like the headmaster's on Friday morning parade begins rumbling in my head. '*Left, right, left, right*' ... no. No, no, no, that's not what the voice is saying. *Made man, made man*. Yes! Made Man! A man half-finished, soon to be made whole. By – Him up there, Who can move mountains and from Whom no secrets are hid? No, no. By me. By me! (1981b/1981a, 41)

In this passage, Mason refers to the desire to resist the traditional voices of authority. He comes to see that he does not have to conform to dominant hierarchies or imitate the militaristic, perhaps God-like, voice of the British Headmaster. There is a sense of creative exuberance and endless potential when he realises his own voice.

Mason as narrator does not quite replace the colonial model to become the Headmaster or the “made man”. In emulating that model however, the performance comes to rest somewhere ambivalent, in between the old and the possibility of something other, in the process of being discovered. Reflecting the pressures of standing alone in front of an audience that is still anxious and embarrassed about its developing identity, Mason, in a paternal way perhaps, takes on a voice as narrator that seems almost protective of his younger self and the people and places in which he begins to discover a sense of self. The voice that Mason assumes as narrator – the voice of the “made man” – is appropriated from an English tradition epitomised by the grand theatrics of Dickens, conveyed to Mason through the performances of Williams as Dickens. Adding images of an emerging New Zealand culture in the 1930s, uncertain of itself but on the path to establishing a separate identity, Mason

creates a hybrid performance through which it is possible to see the different possibilities that might come with a community that is searching for an identity.

Mason's sense of moving beyond childhood fantasies follows the moves towards national identity that characterized the work of his literary contemporaries. Following on from a growing self-awareness that grew out of New Zealand's involvement in the Second World War, as well as the attention brought to New Zealand by Edmund Hillary's conquest during the coronation year of Elizabeth II (1953), and pre-empting the friction that would come with the increasing economic and social distance imposed by mother England, *The End of the Golden Weather* can be seen as a symptom of a growing sense of self, and a tool to link together remote and isolated communities with images and ideas that are held in common. Aptly, it took a 'man alone' wandering around the country and conjuring up images of the beach to reach an audience in a way that had not previously been achieved by any kind of theatrical activity in New Zealand. Mason's performance, and particularly his portrayal of the desperate Firpo would have resonated with an audience that was revelling on the glow of Peter Snell and Murray Halberg's achievements in the Rome Olympics of 1960.

The timing of *The End of the Golden Weather* goes some way to explaining why it, of the four solo performances that Mason created, should be so successful. After *The End of the Golden Weather*, Mason returned to the solo form several times without ever gaining the kind of popular success of *The End of the Golden Weather*. These performances continued Mason's experiment with different styles of performance and, most importantly, served as a platform for Mason's ideas in terms of New Zealand identity. *To Russia with Love* (1965), for example, considered Mason's disillusionment caused by the failed socialist utopia in Russia under the

Stalin regime. *Courting Blackbird* (1976) is another attempt to explore socialist possibilities, this time within the New Zealand context. Perhaps, though, it is *Not Christmas, But Guy Fawkes* (1976), which came closest to Mason's experience with *The End of the Golden Weather*, returning to some of Mason's early experiences and reconsidering them in relation to events that took place later in his life.

Most especially, the centrality of the beach in *The End of the Golden Weather* adds to the performance's popularity with New Zealand audiences. The beach has featured prominently in the arts and literature of the young New Zealand culture, perhaps unsurprising considering New Zealand is a set of islands with a significant coastline. It was here also that Maori and Pakeha first made contact. The image of the beach has been a way to explore identity in a way that is distinct from the British Isles, the Greek Islands or other island states in Polynesia. As a betwixt and between zone that is not-quite-land, not-quite-not-land, it is the perfect metaphoric backdrop for New Zealand's ongoing transition from the status of colonial outpost to that of young nation still looking toward England as its primary frame of reference but finding its image somewhat closer to where it lives. From the perspective of Pakeha, Mason represents the desire for the post-colonial, taking up a form that is not-quite-theatre, not-quite-not-theatre and revealing the potential *and* limitations that come with such a pursuit, and of being not-quite-native, not-quite-not-native.

Metaphorically, Mason stands on the beach and points towards the different possibilities of being *beached*. Mason's adaptation of the form used by the likes of Dickens, Twain and Thomas, reflects the potential of coming ashore with 'baggage' from another land and reconsidering it anew in a different environment. Likewise, Mason's beach is a stage between the land and the "king and queen" that stand offshore, like the English homeland left behind: rocks off which a youthful Mason

(and a youthful Pakeha culture) may leap. This picture conjures up memories of my own youth in which coming to the beach (often deserted in New Zealand) was a moment of great excitement. The beach and its surrounds were a place to be explored, where I could reinvent myself away from the world I had left behind. In this sense, the beach is a place of promise and becoming. It is a place of life.

At the same time, to be *beached* may also evoke images of abandonment and death. Mason's beach can be a place of danger for the unwary, where "there is no smoothness", only rocks that are "jagged, cutting and tearing at the bare foot" (1981b/1981a, 3). It can be a place of limited survival beset with ill omens such as the alluring yet destructive jellyfish or the stranded starfish that lies "marooned, diminishing in the sun" (1981b/1981a, 3). For Pakeha, there is the tendency to ignore the (jagged) cultural environment of New Zealand and to impose ideals (smoothness) based on an English/Western cultural heritage. That is, in trying to tell *the* story of the land, there is a tendency to efface the history that already exists and supplant it with something new or, rather, something old and borrowed, thus forgoing the new perspectives that are possible were difference to be acknowledged and engaged with.

As a Pakeha New Zealander, I find Mason's idea of finding a unique and individual voice exciting and inspiring. In acknowledging where Pakeha stand, and developing Pakeha voices, there is the potential for Pakeha to have something to say about the ways in which identity is constructed. In my attempt to take a step back and listen to the images evoked by Mason's voice, I can *also* see that despite Mason's desire to speak as himself, the emulation of an English voice leaves him stranded. In imitating models from elsewhere, the Pakeha identity closely resembles the institutionalised Firpo. Firpo's desire to be 'whole' is indicated when he gazes longingly at the muscular figure of Canadian wrestling champ Jess Cabot. This

Pakeha culture desires to be complete in the way that other former British colonies have *supposedly* reached completeness. This desire to emulate models from elsewhere means that Firpo must ignore the surroundings in which he finds himself. In the end, Firpo, like Pakeha culture, may be not-quite-here, not-quite-there, between land and sea, *beached*.

As a solo performance, *The End of the Golden Weather* exhibited the potential of being in between, unsettled. The pioneer-like cobbling together of different materials to reach an audience seemed to result, almost accidentally, in a dialogue about what it meant to be local. The transportability of the form allowed Mason access to the remote areas that typify the New Zealand experience. The aloneness of Mason on stage reflected a sense of isolation, and allowed for a conversation that engaged with the way this state affected New Zealand identity. Solo performance allowed Mason, quite literally, to reach a community in the 1950s and into the 1960s that was searching for a sense of identity, the status as British farmyard in the South Pacific becoming increasingly irrelevant. Mason's *The End of the Golden Weather* transferred from the page to the stage the concerns of a youthful culture looking for a sense of self, communing directly with the audience with shared images, ideas and accents that had seemed so alien in the form of the three-act naturalistic plays produced by Mason and others.

Over the three decades that Mason performed *The End of the Golden Weather*, the colonial overtones of the literary voice would have become increasingly out of place. It spoke more perhaps to an audience still used to the tours by English professionals than a community that was beginning to find a sense of self. An audience in the 1970s were unlikely to identify with *The End of the Golden Weather* in the same way as had a previous generation, Mason's life-on-the-beach moving



from relevance to being quaintly out of keeping with the events of the time. As it happened, though, by the time Mason had performed *The End of the Golden Weather* for the last time in the early 1980s, another well-known New Zealand playwright, Mervyn Thompson, was thinking about going it alone in order to reach a community on the brink of radical social and economic reforms that would have a profound effect on the way identity came to be constructed in New Zealand.

## Chapter Two

### Grounded: Redefining New Zealand Identity in Mervyn Thompson's

#### *Coaltown Blues*

[Mervyn Thompson's] aim is to appeal to the audience that makes up his subject-matter, but his deliberately entertaining use of music and music hall, politics and pantomime has fitted uneasily into the present professional theatres. Those companies are so concerned to cater for their traditional, if fickle supporters that they hesitate to look for wider support. The result is that a second New Zealand playwright has been forced to become a one-man band, performing and parading his own work. *Coaltown Blues* will fill every studio in the land.

From Sebastian Black's review of *Coaltown Blues*, 1984<sup>1</sup>

Reviewing Mervyn Thompson's *Coaltown Blues* at the Maidment Theatre in 1984, Sebastian Black made a connection between Thompson and Bruce Mason as New Zealand playwrights forced to go it alone. *Coaltown Blues*, though, looks very different to *The End of the Golden Weather*. On stage, an extensive set signifies the communities of Thompson's youth on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island, which he merges into a single mythical community called "Blacktown". Central to this community is the coalmine, marked on stage by the wooden struts of an abandoned mine, with a skip that runs on rails from the mine's upstage entrance to the audience's feet. As the lights come up Thompson is sitting on the skip, dressed in miner's get-up: grey pants and black jacket, and a helmet with a torch strapped on top. The picture of the miner Thompson once was and the actor he now finds himself to be, is completed by a dash of makeup to lighten his cheeks and dirty his hands, a way of showing his place at the coalface. As he stands to explain his place before the

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<sup>1</sup> Black (1984a, 39).

audience, weaving together monologue with song, accompanied by a pianist, Thompson indicates a different perspective to that of Mason and other playwrights at the 'coalface' of New Zealand theatre. He attempts to reach a New Zealand audience with forms and styles that were popular with the late nineteenth century working classes in Britain.

It was because of this style choice, Black says, that Thompson was forced to take up solo performance. In the 1970s, Thompson had adapted these forms in his plays and used a collaborative approach in his working practice as the co-founder of one of New Zealand's first professional theatres, the Court Theatre in Christchurch. However, like Mason, Thompson had to contend with a resistance to theatre work that staged imagery, ideas and accents that represented the New Zealand condition. The amateur groups that had once filled the void between tours by companies from England became the basis for a new professional theatre movement, maintaining season play-lists that presented the classics of West End and Broadway. Reflecting on his working class background on the West Coast, Thompson attempted to unsettle the predominantly middle class audience with form and content that was direct and confrontational. Black suggests that Thompson's adaptation of working class styles and techniques made Thompson "the most distinctive voice in New Zealand theatre for over a decade" (1984a, 39).

Despite Black's claim that the solo form is a "mode of constraint" (1984a, 39), as with Mason and *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* proved to be the most successful work of Thompson's career. *Coaltown Blues* played 114 times between 1984 and 1988, and toured all over the country. In particular, Thompson managed to tour the performance to the places where he had grown up on the West Coast and Otago, something he had aimed to do but never achieved with his other

theatre work in the main centres of Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. *Coaltown Blues* was performed more times than any of Thompson's other work, including those works he directed in the major theatres around the country. It is an extraordinary achievement for theatre in New Zealand. Had ill health not intervened, his final production, another autobiographical solo performance titled *Passing Through* (1991), may have gone on to be as successful as *Coaltown Blues*.

The success of *Coaltown Blues* can be explained by the way Thompson emulates the popular solo performer of working class entertainments – the basis to his theatrical aesthetic. Music Hall, vaudeville and burlesque were forms and styles of performance that became popular through the course of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and were dominated, mostly, by a sequence of solo performers, linked together by a Master of Ceremonies (MC), who, likewise, tended to work alone on stage. Although these forms would go on to be adapted and made respectable for a middle class audience, their origins as entertainment for a working class audience usually meant a performer had to find different ways to reach an often hostile and unruly audience, regularly changing mid-performance to meet the conditions. Thus, these kinds of theatrical entertainments tended to be eclectic, with little regard for generic boundaries. Indeed, performers often played upon differences, especially in relation to music, parodying, say, the operatic aria by adding bawdy lyrics as a way of gaining the audience's favour. In such action it is possible to see the antecedent of modern variety shows and stand-up comedy.

In order to understand Thompson's success with *Coaltown Blues*, in this chapter I take a closer look at working class entertainments. As with Mason, it seems that the success that Thompson found with *Coaltown Blues* is related to the way he married a style inherited from a 'home' culture with the particular socio-historical

circumstances of New Zealand in the 1980s. I refer, primarily, to a video recording of a performance of *Coaltown Blues* (Thompson, 1988), and consider the various incarnations of working class forms, in the music halls of nineteenth century England, Brechtian theatre of Weimar Germany and the feminist monologue of American culture in the 1970s and 1980s. To explore how Thompson comes to embody the talking blues of the slave/worker to reach a New Zealand audience, I want to dig through – ‘mine’ might be a better term in this context – the different adaptations of working class forms, especially as they come to be expressed (or could be expressed) through solo performance. The blues reference in the title makes a parallel between Thompson and the African slaves of American culture, and their use of music as a way of coping and resisting exploitation and oppression. On what terms would such a parallel resonate with a New Zealand audience in 1984? How did playing the singing slave/worker alone on stage allow Thompson to embody his political and aesthetic ambitions, and how did this affect his ongoing work in New Zealand theatre?

Howard McNaughton suggests that a precedent to Thompson was the solo performer Charles Thatcher (McNaughton 1992, 5). Thatcher, who had travelled to Australia from England, initially as a goldminer, went on to become a popular entertainer, travelling the goldmining communities of Australia and New Zealand through the 1850s and 1860s. His ‘medleys’ were a variety of songs and monologues, satire and farce, as well as improvised material that included: “telling stories, yarning, singing songs, firing off outrageous opinions, making cracks and jokes, and generally ‘going on his nerves’” in a mixture of “colloquial humour, the tall story, the newspaper column, the music hall, the popular lecture” (Hoskins 1996, 2). Thatcher’s solo performances reflected the miners’ concerns for the developing society of New Zealand, extolling the virtues of egalitarianism and a classless society. Eventually

returning to England, he created a performative lecture that he called *Life on the Goldfields*, which incorporated his celebrations of the embryonic societies of New Zealand and Australia with, at times, biting criticism of the ways in which officialdom stifled “the diggers’ doctrine of an indivisible society” (Hoskins 1996, 1).

To appreciate how Thompson’s use of this style, it is necessary to explore the music halls of nineteenth century London – a place where Thatcher, for example, learnt his trade, first as a flautist in the orchestra and then as a performer in his own right. In the collected articles of *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (1986), a picture emerges of the music hall as a popular meeting place in the nineteenth century, especially for the working classes. Taking place in large halls that were brightly lit both on the raised stage *and* in the auditorium, the audience tended to be a seething mass, constantly on the move. Working class male patrons in various configurations or associations dominated the halls, but there were other groups distinguished by gender, age and class. That is, although the entertainment was mainly aimed at working class males, it seems that different groups from English society also came to enjoy the entertainment. While distinctions may have been maintained between these different groups – there were different seating arrangements and distinctive positions in relation to the stage and other audience members – as the entertainment progressed these groups would mingle. In this way, the music halls had the potential to both support and undermine class distinctions in the way the audience moved around, crossing areas reserved for different social groups as others did the same.

From his position in the orchestra pit, either to the front or side of the stage depending on the particular hall he was playing in, Thatcher would have witnessed some of the greatest solo performers of the time. These performers were mostly male, although there were notable exceptions such as performer Jenny Hill. Hill, like other

successful performers, gained a reputation for being able to reach the constantly moving audience that at different times may be more concerned with their own business than what was happening on stage. For Hill, this meant taking her point of view as a woman and making fun of men, particularly those that might be barracking from the audience (Bratton 1986a, 107). Performers had to produce entertainment that would, at different times, appeal to the whole group, or different sections of the audience. There was a tendency to produce material that would play up some of the divisions within the audience, “calling on the powerful emotional force of their rivalries and antagonisms” (Bratton 1986, xii). The success of the performer in creating a lively and entertaining environment within the halls would increase the likelihood that the performer would be paid well and rehired.

At the same time, Thatcher learnt from the most successful performers the ability to be able to bring disparate elements together, particularly through the use of music. The right song choice, sometimes selected on the fly, was an essential way of reaching an audience and ‘saving’ a performance if it was being shouted down by spectators. Anthony Bennett suggests that songs were learned through one of two paths:

On the one hand was the oral culture, now fast desiccating and apparently lacking either the vitality or perhaps more simply the time, in the few decades under construction, to generate any significantly new material. On the other hand was the now dominant language evolved over centuries by professional composers. (Bennett 1986, 2)

Bennett suggests that song choice was based on familiarity, which created the possibility that the audience could sing along. Differences were introduced to traditional folk songs as well as recently successful compositions by the addition of lyrics. But mostly there was little original material; rather a rigid harmonic structure was applied to the melodic aspects of traditional folk songs (Bennett 1986, 3).

Resisting the dramatic expressiveness of Italian opera, the English form relied on a simple lyricism to add to traditional tunes, a tendency that had lasted since the success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Bennett suggests that the success of this style, a forerunner to Thatcher and Thompson, is emphasized by a number of one-man shows that had long runs in established theatres and toured extensively.

The emphasis on producing familiar songs as a way of inviting 'singalongs' suggests that the solo performer of music hall aimed to create a sense of communality with the audience. This reflects the origins of music hall entertainments within the taverns and alehouses of eighteenth century Europe, where people would sing in groups, and often with, or led by, a solo performer. Bennett refers to the combination of the musical and social aspects of these forms as "harmonic" – as they came to be known in countless songbooks – or as "convivial singing" (Bennett 1986, 6). When the industrial era gave rise to larger-scale venues such as the music hall, the successful performer maintained the communal principle of alehouse and tavern by introducing material that generated a sense of conviviality on a larger scale. Performances could be spiced up by jokes and improvisation, the adaptability of the form allowing him to change mid-performance to comment on events taking place in the present. Not only, as I mentioned, could performers poke fun at the establishment or different groups in terms of gender for example, but also the solo performer might create a 'them and us' in terms of regional or national distinctions.

It is an appeal to locality that leads McNaughton to suggest that Thatcher's performances of music hall entertainments in New Zealand may have been a precedent not only for Thompson's solo performance but for Mason's also.

McNaughton does not elaborate on what the similarities might be, but says:

Like Thatcher's theatre, Mervyn's solo work brings a broad assembly of images of the society around him, but the focus that binds them together is



highly individualised. Like Thatcher, it can use music to camouflage a sometimes savage indictment of the way that society works. (1992, 5)

It may be that McNaughton means to draw a parallel between Thatcher, Mason and Thompson in the way they use the personal. His reference to the performances as “highly individualised”, suggests that Mason and Thompson both came to use their personal experiences as a way to explore a wider collective experience.

McNaughton’s comments also make a connection between the two performers in the way they come to use a lyrical style to reach a local audience.

While it is possible to see similarities there are also a number of social and historical differences in how each comes to work out what it means to be local. It should be pointed out, for instance, that Thatcher was also popular in Australia, following, as he had, the gold-rush and performing for an audience that was, like him, itinerant. That is, the miners that attended Thatcher’s performances were not looking to settle in a particular country but following the gold rush from one country to the next. This means that the miner’s concerns were not so much tied to national ideals as to the broad values of the working class miner. Thus, Thatcher’s appeal to generalised ideas of the ‘diggers’ doctrine’ could be adapted from place to place irrespective of local history or conditions. Arguably, Thatcher’s ability to appeal to generalised ideals is comparable to the ‘international’ context of recent solo performance in New Zealand. A similarity can be drawn between Thatcher’s approach and many of these performances in the way they appear to reflect the assertion of an ‘international’ identity rather than the search for a national one. I shall return to discuss this idea in the fourth chapter. For Thatcher in nineteenth century New Zealand, the success of his performances may be attributed to his ability to encourage and foster the dreams of an itinerant goldmining community that was used to tough times.

What unites the theatrical work of Mason and Thompson (and led to them going solo) is the search for a national identity. For Thompson, Mason was the most immediate influence for creating theatre in New Zealand. In his autobiography *All My Lives* (1980), Thompson recounts the night he saw *The End of the Golden Weather* in 1968, reviewing the performance for the Christchurch *Press*. Thompson recalls being touched by the wider significance of the relationship between the boy and Firpo in 'The Made Man'. He later represented the incident in *Passing Through*:

My programme falls to the floor. As I pick it up I tell myself: Bruce, you have shown me the way. You and Firpo. After all these years of funk and delay, I know at last that I must write – and not just tonight's review. (1980, 149)

It appears, though, that it was only during a brief sojourn to London in 1970 that Thompson began writing. He seems to have gone to London and, much like Mason, considered staying on to pursue a career as a playwright – Mason and Firpo's influence was not as simultaneous as he suggests in his autobiography. It was while contemplating his future in London that Thompson decided to return home. With this decision he also started writing his first play, *First Return* (1974) that, like *Coaltown Blues*, featured a return to his roots in an attempt to come to terms with the past. In particular, Thompson wanted to write what he referred to as a "confessional", an autobiographical play that would allow him to engage with the influences that had shaped him (Thompson 1980, 81).

To distinguish the effectiveness of *Coaltown Blues* as a solo performance, it is useful to first consider Thompson's experience with *First Return*, which was created for an ensemble cast. Much of the autobiographical material of *First Return*, especially the representation of an aggressive, bullying father and his mother's suicide, also came to be represented by Thompson in *Coaltown Blues*. It was his second return to the past in a solo performance that was the more successful; however

I want to briefly consider the context in which *First Return* came to be constructed in order to establish the different approach that he would take in representing his past in *Coaltown Blues*.

As he noted in *All My Lives* and later in *Passing Through*, Thompson's past was different to that of Mason:

I can't help being reminded how different his class background is from mine. "There was Us, safe and solid, warm at night, and there was Them – hungry and persistent, but separated from us by an uncrossable gulf" [italics in the original]. What ever might have happened to my surfaces, in my heart I was still one of Them, a hungry guttersnipe from across the tracks. What's more, I had never been to his Te Parenga. (1992, 147-8)

Thompson's observation refers to the "hungry and persistent" men that Mason recounts in *The End of the Golden Weather*, lurking at the back of his childhood home at the height of the Depression, attempting to survive by selling all manner of junk (Mason 1981a, 13). For the young Mason there is a sense of distance between "Them" and "Us" that is unresolved but partially forgotten by the celebrations of Christmas and games of charades played by his middle class family and their friends. In *The End of the Golden Weather*, Mason suggests that this insulates him temporarily from the reality of a wider world that he has little knowledge of. Beginning with *First Return*, Thompson's aim was to represent the experience of "Them", representing his working class experience rather than being spoken for by middle class writers such as Mason.

It is significant that the class difference revealed in the content of *First Return* is also apparent in its form. From the outset of his playwriting career, Thompson can be seen to be perched between Mason's attempt to explore local identity and Thatcher's use of working class entertainments, a style of performance Thompson turned to as a way to represent his experience as working class. Black noted Thompson's use of distinctive forms in a foreword he wrote when *First Return* was

published. He refers to a “second theatrical; tradition which lies behind the play and which reinforces its social implications” (Black 1984b, 12). Black goes on to say:

In this reading one searches not for archetypal images, but for a multitude of “turns” from the vigorous world of music-hall, fairground, vaudeville and the circus. These dramatic moments can create their own universality, and the theatrical forms from which they are culled have their own potent history. They are based in nineteenth century working class entertainments, which the largely naturalist middle-class theatre has disdained. (Black 1984b, 12)

Throughout his career, Thompson was particularly vocal about creating theatre that reflected the New Zealand experience, and his plays, like Mason’s, are very much an attempt to comment directly upon what it means to be a New Zealander. Thompson, however, offered an alternative to the majority of playwrights in New Zealand who tended towards writing naturalistic dramas that represented the life of the middle class. Not only was his use of working class forms seems a way of creating a different theatrical experience for the middle class audience of theatre, but it was also a way to appeal to a working class audience that rarely attended the theatre. As a director, Thompson also aimed to work collaboratively, often constructing performances with students, first, at the University of Canterbury where he had become a lecturer in the late 1960s, and at Auckland University where he taught in the 1980s. He became well known for collaborative performances such as: *O! Temperance!* (1972), which he constructed with acting students, and productions of Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade* and Bertold Brecht’s *Mother Courage*.

Black’s reference to a series of “turns” in *First Return* can also be seen in a broader sense as an attempt to ‘turn’ from a colonial mindset to a post-colonial one. At the beginning of *First Return*, the mode is a naturalistic reflection of the play’s conception in England, the character of Simon (based on Thompson) deciding to return from England to New Zealand, despite his homeland being a “dairy factory attached to a cemetery” (Thompson 1992, 150). Thompson, using an expressionistic

style, represents the return to New Zealand in terms of a theatricalised nightmare, the character of Simon becoming ringmaster to a parade of vaudeville types – including representations of his mother and father – dancing and singing. As he cracks a whip, the character of Simon says:

So come on, my demons. It's time to dance. Yes, That's right. You, Mother. And you, Father. And you, dark woman of my dreams. All of you dance! Dance! (Music) My dance and yours! Dance my gratitude that you came and gave me something to celebrate at last. Dance my belief that this is where we must all begin – with our nakedness, our jaggedness, our entrapment in the rock of our history! Or its lack! Dance! Dance, all you bee-utiful bastards! Dance! (Thompson 1992, 150)

This demand gives the sense of a stripping back to nakedness, a return to roots that is, at the same time, horrifying and liberating. In this way, Thompson attempted to engage with the experience of living in New Zealand by acknowledging a deep sense of personal unease as something that was culturally oriented, very much of the rocks and earth. It may be seen as a way of finding, through theatre, a community that had little sense of a past or place.

At the same time, the play reflects Thompson's attempts to be recognised as a playwright. While he tried to use working class forms to break the illusion of 'normality' in naturalistic drama, in *First Return* the action throughout is played out as if behind a fourth wall. This would appear to diminish the political aims to which Thompson aspired, aims he had hoped to fulfil by turning to working class forms and the directness between performer and audience that came with them. This conformity to the conventions of theatre reflects an ongoing tension in Thompson's work between a desire to represent a working class perspective and the need to be appreciated as a theatre practitioner by a predominantly middle class culture. Black implies that this tension is evident in Thompson's work, and hardly surprising considering his background and the environment he found himself in as a playwright:

[I]t is not surprising that an author, who had moved from a coalmine on the West Coast to the University of Canterbury, should at first both write, and wish to be appreciated, in the terms of that traditional middle class culture which was at last accessible to him. (Black 1984b, 12)

In *First Return*, Thompson's use of working class forms seems caught between a critique of his identity as a way of engaging with a larger notion of New Zealand identity (and what that might be), and a story that is offered to the middle class audience as an exotic ride on the 'other side'. Perhaps the pressure to be respected as an artist rather than a 'showman', led Thompson to conform to conventional standards of theatre. In doing so, the action in *First Return* suggests that Thompson's experience may be *only personal* and not related to a wider social environment that his audience might share, and diminishing, therefore, the kind of political engagement that he was searching for.

The pressure to conform seems to have influenced a large part of Thompson's career. According to Thompson, it took time to convince the board of the Court Theatre to stage *First Return* (even though he had been co-founder of the Court), a reward, he says, that was finally afforded him after success with other productions such as *King Lear* and *O! Temperance!* (Thompson 1984, 114). Thompson says that the staging of *First Return* in 1974, with Thompson directing and acting in the lead role, was relatively successful, financially and critically (Thompson 1984, 122). He argued, though, that it would take time for local work to gain *and* sustain an audience – he also staged Mason's *Awatea* in the same year – and insisted that it was important to persevere with local work, if, as he had intended, the Court Theatre was to become a home for New Zealand theatre. Thompson says his eventual decision to leave the Court in 1974 was fuelled by the inability of others to share his vision: the financiers of the Court deciding that traditional English and American fare were more likely to get 'bums on seats' than local works, and stacking their play-lists accordingly.

Thompson claimed that similar battles led to a tempestuous term as the Artistic Director of Wellington's Downstage Theatre from 1975 to 1977 and a growing reputation as someone who was difficult to work with because of his single-mindedness and unusual techniques (1984, 131-138).

It is in this context that Thompson decided to take up solo performance. Initially, Thompson was, like Mason, reluctant to create a solo performance. Thompson thought it a Sisyphus-like tragedy that Mason had been forced to go solo after "pushing his rock up thankless and resistant slopes in a lonely struggle against philistinism (Thompson 1980, 117), suggesting Thompson thought little of solo theatre. Perhaps he felt that the aloneness of the performer on stage went against his ideals of collaboration and undermined his attempts to create a community and a national identity. However, Thompson discovered that solo theatre was an ideal way to do this in the New Zealand context. Indeed, the advantages of the solo performance seemed especially suited to Thompson and the kind of theatre that he wanted to create. There were, for example, the advantages of manoeuvrability already discussed in terms of Mason and *The End of the Golden Weather*. In Thompson's case, this was particularly rewarding because it allowed him to travel through and beyond the major centres of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. He toured to places such as the West Coast and around Otago – the places where he had grown up. Thompson was especially excited when his performance 'spoke' to the inhabitants of small hydro dam communities in Central Otago. These settlements had emerged to build the dams but struggled to survive when the completion of the dams took away their primary economic reason to function. Thompson discovered that his story in *Coaltown Blues* of a community suffering the effects of economic starvation in the 1950s made an impact in places that were struggling to exist in the 1980s. By representing the various

characters from his past, assuming the roles of those that had shaped him, Thompson could point towards the environment that had come to create them and him. By doing this with an audience, he could create links between the past and present that might allow for a greater sense of something that is held in common.

It is this kind of political dimension that points to the other major advantage that Thompson found in solo performance. In *Singing the Blues* (1991), Thompson's chronicle of the *Coaltown Blues* tour, he referred to the solo performance as the "highpoint of my career" in that it brought "the personal and political together in the most satisfying way" (Thompson 1991, 8). By performing alone on stage, Thompson was able to exploit the latent political potential within working class forms. Thompson believed it possible to subvert the use of music in working class forms, which, as Peter Bailey points out, had been used in Victorian culture to "console", "distract", and "reassure" but never to challenge:

Songs served largely to confirm the experience of working class life rather than to offer escapes or alternatives. Music hall celebrated the commonplace pleasures of beer and comradeship, and the ritual release of the seaside excursion and bank holiday, while chronicling the irreducible ironies of courtship, marriage and old age. Songs were often cynical of authority but accepted the class structure and its inequalities as immovable. (Thompson 1982, 198)

Thompson argued that, if the directness of this form were applied to New Zealand theatre, he could undercut the usual idea of theatre as a form of escape for a middle class audience. The idea of theatre as a form of escape is perhaps also typical of a number of other Western cultures but Thompson seemed to be combating the pervasiveness of such a condition in New Zealand theatre as something acutely related to New Zealand identity. That is, Thompson used music to create an immediate relationship with an audience in an attempt to challenge the sense of cultural isolation fostered by mainstream theatre's imitation of theatre from a former



homeland. In order to mitigate the idea of theatre as a form escapist leisure, Thompson's work involves a search for a theatre that is politically efficacious – grounded in time and place. He referred to music as a way to overcome the “cerebral” aspects of the conventional naturalistic style of theatre (TVNZ, 1991). With music, Thompson believed he could challenge the illusion of everyday life on stage by appealing directly to the spectator with his own story. At the same time, it seems in keeping with Thompson's political aims that his use of such methods would have been directed towards bringing a working class audience into the theatre, representing stories and styles that were familiar to their own experience.

To consider how Thompson used the solo form to achieve his political aims, it is useful to look at his work in relation to that of others who have attempted to exploit working class forms for political ends. For example, an indication of Thompson's political aims is revealed in his admiration for the theories of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's theories of a distinctly political theatre grew out of the politically charged atmosphere of Weimar Germany, where a range of political possibilities were expressed and explored. Following the Marxist-inspired revolution in Russia, Brecht had begun working with Erwin Piscator who had adapted the didactic style of agitprop (agitation and propaganda) theatre to the German situation, a way of educating workers about the disparity and exploitation of the capitalist system under which Weimar Germany functioned. Brecht's work however, first as a playwright and then as a director and deviser, extended Piscator's experiments with a Marxist-oriented theatre that he called Epic Theatre, moving beyond the didactic approach of agitprop. Brecht, like Marx, was influenced by Hegelian dialectics. Translating this idea to the theatre, Brecht attempted to create a dialogue between stage and auditorium that did not offer answers in the form of communist style slogans, but pointed to contradictions inherent

within the capitalist system. In this way, Brecht hoped to activate the spectator, especially the bourgeois audience that frequented the theatre and in whose hands societal change might ultimately rest.

A similarity between Thompson and Brecht is their use of styles that had proved popular with working class audiences to ground their work in a specific time and place. Brecht argued that the usual Aristotelian theatre pacifies the spectator because the emphasis on identification with the character does not allow for critical inquiry. He pointed to naturalism as the most effective style in achieving this kind of pacification (Brecht 1964/1992, 111; 131). Naturalism had become the norm in mainstream theatres since its introduction in late nineteenth century Europe, a style that attempted to create a reality so life-like that the audience would feel as if they were a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ watching a ‘slice-of-life’. He referred to this kind of theatre as a trafficking in “spiritual dope” (Brecht 1964/1992, 135) and as a “bourgeois narcotics business” (179) – dispensing escape for the middle classes by naturalizing the myths, values and ideals that underpinned class distinction within a capitalist society. To counter this kind of theatre, Brecht proposed a literalising of the theatrical apparatus. Central to this practice is the ‘Verfremdungs Effekt’ (alienation effect), which is used to defamiliarize the ‘natural’ in order that the spectator might come to critically analyse the action; Brecht believed this to be the preliminary step towards change. For example, Brecht’s productions would have the lights turned on in the auditorium, and the audience were allowed to see the actors change role on stage. This was done in an attempt to undermine the illusion of real life as represented by naturalistic theatre and point to the constructedness of the theatrical event as a truthful reflection of the way social roles were constructed in life.

With music Brecht pursued a mix of popular and traditional styles of performance, and attempted through these styles to appeal directly to the spectator's sense of reason and logic. Brecht returned to forms such as *Singspiel* an eighteenth century comical music theatre, which incorporated folksongs and classical music, and was performed in a popular or folk style interspersed with spoken dialogue. This may have been a style Thompson was familiar with given the similarly worded 'song-play', the phrase he coined to describe his own theatre. Brecht used the play between music and speech as a way to break the romantic illusions that prevailed in conventional opera and theatre. For Brecht, "nothing is more revolting than when the actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing" (Brecht 1979a, 95). He insisted that actors should clearly distinguish between "plain speech, heightened speech and singing" (Brecht 1979a, 96) in order to delineate between performer and role. Furthermore, he suggested that the different elements should contradict each other, that an actor might portray social values or attitudes (*gestus*) and then sing a song that pointed out the woolly socio-economic motivation behind those attitudes. Brecht suggested that such an approach directly contradicted the naturalistic theatre in which motivation is seen as the direct consequence of psychological forces, individual traits and (in Aristotelian terms) flaws, usually represented as being in need of purgation for the good of society.

For instance, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), Brecht's reworking of *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), is used to explore the contradictions inherent within a capitalist society. Brecht essentially maintained the narrative of John Gay's opera but elaborated on certain details to critique bourgeois morals: a middle class businessman resists his daughter's desire to marry a 'crook', even though he is 'making a killing' by equipping individuals with the ability to act as cripples and beg for money. Brecht

was also drawn to the way the *Beggar's Opera* parodied conventional operas from the time and especially those of Handel. Written from the perspective of a beggar, Brecht encouraged Kurt Weill, the composer of the new version, to follow the spirit of Gay's opera as a 'view from below' and use 'low art' styles that had been popular with the masses.

It is worth noting that although Brecht worked with ensembles, solo performance could be a potent way of putting Brechtian theory into practice. A number of Brecht's plays including *The Threepenny Opera* and *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, draw on the solo tradition of the roving balladeer of medieval times. This was a performer whose "trade it was to entertain the folk with morally enlightening stories purveyed musically", many of the songs being based on the balladeer's distinctive ballads, known as *Bankelgesang* (Ferran 2005, 131). In the image of the roving balladeer that so inspired Brechtian theory, it is not difficult to see the travelling showman that Thompson would later become in New Zealand. Furthermore, Brecht was influenced by Chinese opera seeing in this form a distance between role and character, a "quoting" of character, which in conventional Western theatre, governed by a naturalistic style, is sacrilege (Brecht 1964, 94). The obvious assumption of role through gesture and song would become a staple part of the Brechtian aesthetic; the literalising of the theatrical process, of creating a role, distancing the spectator to see the social roles they play in life. That is, the dialectical exchange that Brecht had hoped to inspire between stage and auditorium, between theatre and life, began with the way the actor created a dialogue between himself as a member of society and the role he constructed. The actor needs to point towards various attitudes in the character's actions that are of social origin as opposed to the emphasis on psychological motivation that glues actor to role in the naturalistic theatre. Brecht

asked that the actor act like a social scientist – reflecting the *raison d'être* of the age – detaching himself so that he could empathise with a role but not so much that identification would subsume him within that role. This detachment was undertaken for the benefit of the audience who were, similarly, asked to maintain a critical distance from the object of imitation in order to reconsider its social and political significance.

In some ways, Thompson's approach in *Coaltown Blues* could be seen as Brechtian, particularly in the direct address to the audience. Even more so in the structure of the performance, there are Brechtian elements as he attempts to bring the social historical aspects of the performance to the surface. Black quotes Thompson as saying of *Coaltown Blues*:

If I could fully understand even that small place, chart its rise and fall, solve the mystery of its people, their barbarity and nobility, frailty and courage, stupidity and sudden surprising wisdom, I would know as much as anyone about the world and its politics. (Black 1984a, 39)

To this end, Thompson incorporates a number of devices that seem Brechtian, including an episodic structure introduced by placards that point to a relationship between historical events and their personal repercussions: the election and subsequent loss of the first Labour Government, VJ Day, and the 1951 Miners' Strike. Throughout the performance, Thompson seems to be pointing to the contradictions that come with the cruelties and inequalities of events that originally offered hope for the working classes but ultimately seem to perpetuate their continuing oppression. For example, in the opening scene Thompson recounts the celebration that accompanied the passing of the Tory Government in 1935, which ushered in the new hope of the first Labour Government under Michael Joseph Savage. However, as he continues to recount his experiences at home, Thompson points to the inability of the Savage government to change the lot of the working classes in any meaningful way. By

playing all the roles himself, Thompson was able to demonstrate the effects of socio-historical and political changes upon the working classes, suggesting a constant defeat of hope despite change.

At the same time, the relationship between actor and role in *Coaltown Blues* suggests that Thompson is taking a different approach to Brecht. Brecht's use of ensemble casts ensured that the dialectical exchange necessary to enact his theory could be enacted between different actors presenting different social roles. Thompson, on the other hand, is essentially playing himself in performance and this results in a close identification with the roles he plays, making it difficult for him to distance himself and point to social attitudes. In his performance of *Coaltown Blues* it seems that Thompson wants the audience to sympathise with his experience. I say this because Thompson represents the various roles as broad generic types, perhaps to allow the audience to recognise this as part of a familiar story. For example, Thompson represents his mother as the paragon of motherly virtue, eventually driven to suicide by the harrowing circumstances that adversely affect her attempts to raise children in Blacktown. This is a different representation of a motherly figure to, say, Brecht's Mother Courage in the play of the same name, a mother who puts her children in harm's way during wartime in an attempt to protect them. For Brecht, the contradiction was not meant to damn the character of Mother Courage but to raise questions about the circumstances, social and economic, which led to her devastating decisions. In a way that is different from the kind of distance that Brecht hoped to create as a means to getting the spectator to analyse the action, in *Coaltown Blues* Thompson's closeness to the role calls for sympathy and understanding.

This means that music in *Coaltown Blues* is used to bring the spectator closer to sympathising with the characters. Thompson's determination to use music in this

way is reflected in his decision to withdraw and then reinstate a song to the performance in response to Black's criticism that the performance lost its political edge. The song, 'Song for Dad', is sung after recollecting his mother's suicide and Thompson considered it: "as good a song about grief as you are likely to find" (Thompson 1991, 51). Black criticised the performance for becoming too personal as a "self-consciously 'poetic' quality enters the narrative line linking the episodes, and turns sentiment into sentimentality" (Thompson 1984, 45). Thompson decided that such objections were part of a middle class squeamishness with the personal, a belief that such work looks "amateurish", is "embarrassing" and doesn't "play the game" (Thompson 1991, 52). Therefore, he returned the song to the performance adding a line of dialogue, tinted with sarcasm: "Enough of that. This is, after all, a Political Play" (Thompson 1986, 37).

Thompson's attempt to find the political through the personal suggests another model of performance that has a relationship with working class forms: the feminist monologue. Although this form came into its own in the second wave of feminism of the 1970s and 1980s in North America, its roots can be traced back to the first wave of feminism in the latter parts of the nineteenth century. It was during the first wave of feminism that the discussion about the place of women began to lead to political change, especially, the right to vote, which was first achieved in New Zealand in 1893 and explored in Thompson's *O! Temperance!* (1972). It is possible to attribute these political changes, in part, to the increasing visibility of women brought about by music hall performers such as Jenny Hill. Hill had gained a reputation for creating variety performances that not only catered to the traditional working class male audience but also created a place in the music halls for a growing female audience (Bratton 1986a, 93). It was this female audience that remained her most loyal

supporters, as she spiced up the traditional working class songs with a working class female perspective that often used wit and irony to satirise a patriarchal Victorian society and the role of women within it.

Susan A. Glenn, in *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, says that the female performer in the American context created performances that “resonated with and articulated the frustrations, fears, and desires of the larger female population” (Glenn 2000, 217). Glenn argues that although these kinds of performances were never overtly political, they played a part in changing attitudes towards women, bringing a degree of visibility to the experience of working class women (from the perspective of working class women) who had largely remained invisible in society and its representation. She traces a lineage from vaudeville performers such as Eva Tanguay, Gertrude Hoffmann and Irene Franklin, through the subsequent demise of vaudeville with the advent of cinema. She points out, however, that the ongoing spirit of women in enterprising roles continued with former vaudevillians like Mae West. Glenn suggests that these women can be seen as forerunners to the solo performers of second wave feminism and the performance artists and comics of recent times (Glenn 2000, 218).

From the female performers of music hall and vaudeville, the performers of second wave feminism gained a model to express ‘her-story’. The monologue became an iconic feature of the feminist movement. At the same time, in keeping with the tendency of music hall and vaudeville to draw on an eclectic mix of styles, ‘high’ and ‘low’, to entertain mass audiences, these performances may be seen to hybridise the largely comic with the loftier melodramatic monologue tradition exemplified by actress Sarah Bernhardt. Bernhardt presented a range of roles from the popular stage of melodrama, perhaps the most well known being her portrayal of Salome. She



toured this solo performance extensively through Europe and America at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Recent scholarship, especially by writers who identify themselves as feminist, have pointed to the political import of the melodrama as a form of expression for those who had, historically, been silenced. The hysterical female body and excessive emotional outpouring that is associated with the melodramatic has been viewed as a return of repressed desires, thus revealing the social and political oppression of women and its causes within a patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup>

It is revealing to compare Thompson's performance in *Coaltown Blues* with the solo performer of the feminist monologue. The feminist monologue might be considered a way for women to overcome the social repression experienced in a male dominated society. By taking the stage alone and representing their experiences, it was possible for a performer to experience a kind of purging. This act may also make it possible to create a sense of community, particularly with other women. It seems plausible that women were drawn to experience these solo performances in order to hear stories from others who may have had similar experiences and, in so doing, would be able to share their own stories with those gathered for the performance. That is, by hearing other stories of women who had felt isolated by society in the company of other women sharing similar experiences, this kind of isolation was addressed. It is possible to see Thompson feeling isolated because of his working class background in a society governed by the middle classes, and, therefore, seeking out through theatre a broader community within New Zealand.

Thompson believed that criticism of *Coaltown Blues* as being too personal and hysterical reflected the oppression of the working class by the middle class. Perhaps in a way that is similar to the aims of the feminist monologue, Thompson rebuffed

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<sup>2</sup> See Brooks (1976), Gledhill (1987), Bratton, Cook and Gledhill (1994).

such criticism by arguing that his approach was a political challenge to the usual depersonalised theatre of middle class playwrights. In *Singing the Blues* he says:

In any case working-class writers have always favoured autobiography. When one's life is chock-full of incident there is little *need* to invent. And even if one *does* manage to free oneself from one's class chains – and contrive to join the cultural classes in the realms of art and dreams – incident has a habit of following one round. The compulsion to repeat is an affliction that every working class-writer knows very well... All the same, I'd dearly like to be one of those middle-class writers to whom nothing ever happens. Living an uneventful life creates an artistic freedom that my kind of writer doesn't have – and puts a high priority on fiction and other sports. *Our* lot is condemned to spend most of its time filing reports from hell! (1991, 53-54)

Thompson's approach as described here calls to mind the feminist catchphrase, 'the personal is political'. Thompson referred to *First Return* in terms that suggest an approach that would not be out of keeping with strands of feminism, his use of the phrase 'confessional' in particular. It is, though, in his second return with a solo performance that he fully conveys the sense of a 'confessional', and in a way that seems similar to the revealing feminist monologues of the 1980s. Thompson referred to *Coaltown Blues* as supporting the equal rights of women, especially in giving voice to his mother, a representative of women who suffer inequality in a patriarchal system.

While it is possible to see parallels between Thompson's solo performance and the social aims of the Feminist monologue, in the way that Thompson plays his mother, there is the sense of 'woman' as archetype, and, possibly, stereotype. From a feminist perspective, such stereotyping would be problematic to say the least. In performance, Thompson represents his mother as an embattled wife, bullied by her husband and constantly twisting a cleaning rag around her hands in what seems to be an expression of a repressed state. He represents her as regularly hysterical, a woman who identifies with all the oppressed peoples of the world:

‘Safe! No one’s safe! Were *they* safe?’ She throws her library book of concentration camp horrors at [the father]. ‘Were they?’ A newspaper photo of bombed Hiroshima. ‘Nothing’s safe, nothing and nobody. We live in a world of horror and atrocity, and Blacktown’s just another concentration camp site!’ *Mum has become vehement, hysterical. Now she breaks down.* ‘Oh, this place, with its corrugated iron walls and corrugated iron soul’. (Thompson 1986, 31)

Here, as throughout the performance, Thompson comes to represent his mother as a symbol of motherly compassion who is continuously beaten. His attempt to make the audience see his experience through his mother suggests that Thompson is representing his own feelings of isolation in an attempt to find a wider community from which he feels excluded. In an attempt to do so, he seems to be aligning himself with all those that he considers the underclass, a comparison that made him a controversial figure, particularly with feminist groups in the 1980s. This was especially the case when Thompson, after being abducted by a group of women in 1984, tied to a tree and accused of rape, became the focus of debates around feminism in New Zealand.<sup>3</sup>

Thompson’s attempt to represent his mother and other characters in *Coaltown Blues* suggests that he was looking for an idea of nation based on the broad aims of socialism – to revive these ideals. Yet, the nationalistic appeal that drives the working class politics of *Coaltown Blues* seems out of keeping with the broader aims of feminism, whether liberal, radical or materialist. Thompson, that is, uses the personal as a way to revive and celebrate an idea of nation based on the bedrock values of the working class. Whereas feminism looks to challenge traditional unities such as nation as a masculine construct by revealing how the female identity is out of keeping with such structures – that an ideal of ‘woman’ as subservient is used to prop up such structures – Thompson is very much working towards an idea(1) of national unity,

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson discusses the abduction in *Singing the Blues* (1991) and talks about the ongoing turmoil the accusations of rape had on his life as he toured *Coaltown Blues* around New Zealand.

albeit one that combines his father's working class politics with his mother's female compassion and nurturing instincts.

I have considered Thompson's performance in *Coaltown Blues* in relation to others that have used working class forms in an attempt to create a political theatre. It is possible to see similarities and important differences with all these examples. The final comparison that needs to be considered is closer to home. Thompson's attempt to explore national identity by reflecting on personal experience makes sense in relation to the emerging tradition of New Zealand arts and literature. Following Mason, Thompson's use of the solo form embodies the 'man alone' figure that repeatedly appears as an expression of the desire for a separate identity, especially with the cultural nationalism of the 1930s – a movement described as especially masculinist in its celebration of a stoic individualism. In some respects, Thompson shares a background that is closer to some of the pioneering 'man alone' figures of settler New Zealand, carving out the New Zealand society to create a place to call home. At the same time, he brings with him a working class politics, grounded in the mining communities of the West Coast where the idea of community supersedes the individual. Through the figure of his father, Thompson reveals the politics of the working class, inherited from Britain, where the words emblazoned on the miners' hall at the centre of the community reflect a way of life as well as a call to arms: "World's Wealth, World's Workers; United We Stand, Divided We Fall" (Thompson 1986, 22).

Thompson's approach to the solo form differs to that of Mason in both social and historical dimensions. Whereas Mason turns to a form newly arrived on the beach with Emyln Williams in 1959, in the 1980s Thompson turns to forms that have a history grounded within the mining communities of the West Coast. Although both

use their personal story in an attempt to assert a new kind of indigeneity for Pakeha, for Thompson in 1984 there is a greater sense of becoming grounded within the land and earth of New Zealand. In a television interview shortly before his death,

Thompson said:

And I think also the fact that I worked down a coalmine and went under the earth and got very much involved with this notion of the New Zealand earth, of New Zealand as a place to which I belonged, in which I was literally deeply enmeshed, came through very strongly. (TVNZ 1991)

In this light, the coalmine reflects the nationalistic impulses that drove Thompson's theatre, searching for a sense of solidity and permanence in the land. At the same time, the socialist politics that come with a miner background mean that, although performing alone in *Coaltown Blues*, Thompson appeals to a sense of community in a way that is attempting to be more overtly political than Mason.

The comparison between *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* is not an incidental one. Thompson very clearly sets up his solo performance in conversation with Mason's. Early on in *Coaltown Blues*, he recounts a fight between his parents as a storm rages outside, and suggests his experience in the different mining communities of the West Coast meant: "I had known terrors before – and not all that much in the way of Golden Weather" (Thompson 1986, 16). In particular, he establishes the coalmine as a metaphoric as well as a literal site, as Mason does with the beach. However, if the beach is a place of leisure in *The End of the Golden Weather*, the coalmine in *Coaltown Blues* is a site of hard labour down which the young Thompson descends, it seems inevitably, to support his family. And if Mason's youth is filled with the golden light of the beach in summer as he comes to the magnificent revelation that he can construct his own identity, it is as if Thompson, his family and community are continuously stuck down a hole, unable to see any light

except for passing phantasms that eventually give way to an awareness that his identity is shaped by forces and events outside of his control.

Thompson's work implies that the coalmine as man-made construct represents the possibility of change that his theatre was attempting to create. If, that is, the beach is a natural phenomenon ultimately outside of man's control, the man-made feature of the coalmine is capable of being altered; if man got himself into a hole, he can get himself out. The possibility of change seems to be signaled at the beginning of the performance when Thompson tells the audience that his birth coincides with the birth of the first Labour Government, only to retract the coincidence a moment later – he was actually born a couple of years later – suggesting a challenge to fixed notions of identity, and destabilizing the kind of seamlessness with which Mason comes to symbolize New Zealand identity as a 'Made Man'. Thompson goes on to suggest that a consideration of his own working class experience may allow for change because it is the bedrock to the New Zealand identity, a down-to-earth, grounded reality that seems the very opposite of a middle class Englishness attached to the etiquette and values of 'home'. In particular, Thompson returns home to the place where the Labour Government was born, in the pits of the West Coast, and at a time when it was replacing the Tory Government of Forbes and Coates. He tells the audience that the working class despised the Tories. *Coaltown Blues* attempts to revitalize the political aspect of Thompson's own birth within the mining communities of the West Coast both for himself and for a wider New Zealand audience.

There is a sense of immediacy to the appearance of *Coaltown Blues* in the same year that the fourth Labour Government replaced the crushing dictatorial style of Robert Muldoon's conservative National government. Muldoon had driven the country to near bankruptcy. As *Coaltown Blues* was being toured around the country

over the next four years, Thompson would see first-hand how the pattern portrayed in *Coaltown Blues* was repeated by the radical socio-economic policies of 'Rogernomics'. Thompson suggests that, as was the case with Michael Savage's Labour Government, the social and economic reforms that followed the 1984 election impoverished rather than liberated the lower classes in New Zealand. For the fourth Labour Government, the change from a traditional policy based on welfare and education to an emphasis on developing an open market economy, conformed to the socio-economic dominance of conservative powerhouses such as the United States under Reagan and Britain under Thatcher. The attempt of the fourth Labour Government in New Zealand to meld traditional community oriented concerns with the free market individualism celebrated by Reaganomics and Thatcherism, would be taken up by other previously left leaning parties in the political world, most notably Tony Blair's New Labour Government in England. *Coaltown Blues* was, therefore, a poignant way to instigate a discussion about issues relevant to the times by tying the present to the past.

In the last chapter I discussed the possibilities of solo performance in terms of being *beached*. In relation to Thompson's use of solo performance, it might be said that he shows the potential and limitations of an attempt to become *grounded*. On the one hand, we have seen that solo performance allowed Thompson, like Mason, to get to the isolated communities that make up New Zealand culture. For Thompson in particular, solo performance allowed him to reach both the regular middle class patrons of theatre in the main cities *and* a wider audience, especially in the places where he was raised. Like Mason, Thompson was able to use solo performance to go in search of a community in a way that his previous experiences in theatre had not enabled him to do. The direct address of the solo form allowed Thompson the

possibility of taking the discussion about national identity around the country and directly to the community.

At the same time, Thompson's attempt to become grounded by returning to his past in *Coaltown Blues* is affected by a nostalgia that tends to undermine his political intent. In a sense, the coalmine seems to be a place out of which everybody, including a younger Thompson, wants to escape. Yet in *Coaltown Blues* Thompson returns – goes back down the hole, so to speak – searching for his political roots by travelling through the country to rediscover the socialist politics that held the communities of his past together. At one point in the performance, Thompson tells the audience that he wants to return to the ideals of the Miners' Hall:

For now we're back where we started, at the proudest building in town, the Miners' Hall, with its brave painted inscriptions: 'World's Wealth, World's Workers!' and 'United we Stand, Divided we Fall!' Today more than ever these words have power to move me: opened in 1908, the Miners' Hall has been put there by the sweat and dedication of the townspeople as a meeting house and symbol of solidarity. 'Socialism in this country', my Dad has a habit of saying, 'was born in That Hall'. (Thompson 1986, 22-23)

He suggests that these communities of his youth survived by fighting for something greater than the individualist politics propounded in contemporary culture and especially by the socio-economic policies introduced by the fourth Labour Government. What he discovered as he toured *Coaltown Blues* is that his reference to a socialist ideal needed to be reconsidered in relation to an audience in the present.

The problem with such a nostalgic view, in terms of Thompson's attempt to be political, is that the audience may come to see the performance as having no relevance to the present. In particular, the lack of a dialogue between actor and role makes it possible for the audience to fall into familiar viewing patterns, seeing the action as driven by individual foibles rather than social and economic forces. This is counter to Thompson's stated aims for performing *Coaltown Blues*. At the end of the



performance, the light from his mining helmet picks out individual members of the audience. He says: “Oh Blacktown, Blacktown... I grew up in you, and in your face... I saw the face of the world” (1986, 44). The gesture speaks both of a search for a sense of self in dialogue with the audience – that they are inseparably related in the search – and also an accusation that Thompson’s position as tragic hero has been imposed upon him by those within the audience. The tension between these positions means that the search is hindered and possibly negated by the representation of an identity that is already understood by the audience and, therefore, more readily written off, albeit with sympathy.

In other words, for Thompson, becoming *grounded* also means getting stranded, prevented from taking flight. Thompson’s use of solo performance to represent an identity that is fixed in the past, contradicts the mobility of the form as a reflection of the way identity moves and of theatre’s unique ability to represent it. Thompson does not, for example, consider the central role he plays (himself) as a social construct. But rather he takes a position that is typical of many working class writers/critics, that of an authentic creation whose position ‘down below’ allows them to see the inequality of society and works to make others see their point of view – to change *them*.

As a way to conclude this chapter, it is worth considering the change in Thompson’s approach to solo performance in *Passing Through*, part of which I have seen in a television programme based on Thompson (TVNZ 1991). Thompson’s return to solo performance with *Passing Through* marks a change in how he uses the form to represent identity. Returning to the Court Theatre to perform *Passing Through* in 1991, the figure that takes the stage appears very different to the man who performed *Coaltown Blues*. This is due, in part, to an advanced cancer that would

eventually take his life, and, perhaps, his change of appearance is due to the events that he said had led to him developing cancer – namely, the rape allegations that made Thompson a much-maligned figure through the 1980s. Thompson represents the action – a retrospective of New Zealand theatre – with a sense of impermanence, shifting mellifluously from one subject to the next in a form that, like *Coaltown Blues*, combines song and monologue. As he performs different attitudes in relation to his memories of working in New Zealand theatre, there seems to be a greater degree of distance between him and the material he is looking at. As a result, the performance encourages a sense of distance. Throughout the performance, Thompson often breaks from the prepared performance to comment upon a particular person, event or experience, sometimes referring to people in the audience who played some part in the dramas of all his lives.

This sense of movement may reflect the material he is working with. He recounts: joining the Reefton drama society; working as an actor for Dame Ngaio Marsh; directing a student production of *Marat/Sade* for a tour to Downstage in Wellington; reviewing *The End of the Golden Weather*; attending a workshop with Jerzy Grotowski; and his experiences as a playwright, Artistic Director and spokesman for New Zealand theatre. He also recalls a series of births and deaths that are literal and metaphoric: the appearance of *Foreskin's Lament* as a sign of a new New Zealand drama; the passing of Ngaio Marsh and Bruce Mason; and his experiences with *Coaltown Blues*. Through his recollections, especially as he comes to the furore surrounding *Coaltown Blues*, there is a sense that Thompson is no more sure of who he is than who New Zealand might be. The final song weaves together his reflections of New Zealand with 'Mack the Knife' from Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. As he sings it, Thompson seems uncertain as to the exact significance of these

events in his life or to New Zealand in general, suggesting that such things can only be worked out in the meeting between performer and the audience. He saw such an exchange, in the case of his final performance, as being best pursued through the personal directness of the solo form.

Howard McNaughton, in his introduction to the published version of *Passing Through*, says of the performance:

[I]n the theatrical milieu of *Passing Through*, the solo work expands its function to offer a refraction of everything our theatre can be: this is not a nostalgic retrieval of a lost innocence such as Mason's theatre indulged and mastered, it is the stage in dialogue with its former selves, interrogating them and demanding answers. (McNaughton 1992, 5)

McNaughton argues that such an approach represents a counterpoint to the tendency of a colonial culture to “live in hope of the masterwork that will put it on the map” and suggests that such a culture is “dismissive of the ordeals of its adolescence, which are seen as a necessary phase in an evolutionary coming-of-age” (1992, 5-6). From *The End of the Golden Weather* to *Coaltown Blues* and on to *Passing Through*, there is a change in the way the actor alone represents identity, individually and collectively. From the beach to the coalmine there is clearly a conversation about the coming to land of Pakeha, albeit in terms that are significantly affected by ideas of class, of being ‘above’ and ‘below’, ‘them’ or ‘us’. Perhaps, though, in the dialogue that *Passing Through* creates about the place of theatre in New Zealand, what is revealed in the conversation between the actor alone on stage and his community is the unique ability of theatre to represent identity by acknowledging that we are, after all, just *passing through*.

### Chapter Three

#### Te Hokinga Mai/The Return Home: Representing Bicultural Identity in

##### *Michael James Manaia*

I mean Fuck, what the hell do you do?  
 There I was, tearing down the main street  
 faster than a horse's arse,  
 when all of a sudden this goddamn cop gets in the act

The opening to *Michael James Manaia*<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of *Michael James Manaia* it is hard to know where you stand. Mason and Thompson begin their solo performances by inviting the audience to join them at a specific place and a specific time. But in this solo performance, written by John Broughton and performed by Jim Moriarty, the opening gambit throws you off centre, seeming to start in the middle of something that the audience has to work out as the performance progresses.

There are clues to time, place and circumstance along the way. Moriarty-as-Manaia is dressed in faded khakis and boots. This gives the impression that he is some sort of army veteran. He keeps scratching his arms and neck. He often interrupts his address to the audience to talk with some mysterious, unexplained presence. Three chairs, each slightly different in shape, surround him. They give the impression of a waiting room: formal, grey, functional rather than fashionable. Above his head hangs the bust (as in the head) of an angelic being. The stage is covered in earth. The combination of scratching man, chairs, angel and dirt give the impression of worlds colliding, coming together but, at the same time, incongruous. As he recalls his life

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<sup>1</sup> Broughton 1991, 13.

for the audience, it becomes evident that he is indeed the sum creation of different cultures, and that the different perspectives of each rages in conflict within him. He tells the audience about his birth to an English mother and Maori father, about his early upbringing on a marae, and his father's search for employment, which takes their family into an urban settlement dominated by Pakeha laws and values. He recounts school days, the death of his brother, military training and service in Vietnam, his return to New Zealand, marriage, repeated miscarriages and the death of his newly born, deformed son by his own hands. With this final revelation, some of the mystery is solved as to whom and where the character of Manaia might be. The three chairs become the other major clue to the idea of a group therapy session, conducted, presumably, to help Manaia come to terms with infanticide. But, then, *Michael James Manaia* is not just another story about a Vietnam Veteran who is F.U.B.A.R. ("fucked up beyond all recognition"). As Moriarty breaks out of character at the end of the performance to talk to the audience, a persistent question returns: who is Michael James Manaia?

At an individual and social level, the question manifests, quite deliberately, within the form of a solo performance. Mason and Thompson went it alone because they had tried everything else, and solo performance was seen as a last resort in the attempt to develop an audience for New Zealand theatre; in the process of doing so, they came to question cultural identity through the representation of their own experiences. Broughton, on the other hand, expressly created *Michael James Manaia*, as a solo performance for Moriarty, a way for them to explore the bicultural identity they share. The form of *Michael James Manaia* is based on the traditions of Maori culture, a heritage shared by Broughton and Moriarty and the basis for their previous collaborations under the banner of what they call Theatre Marae. As the name

suggests, Theatre Marae is a hybrid, working between Western theatre and marae (the traditional meeting place in Maori society). In an interview with John Broughton, he told me that *Michael James Manaia* was created with a view to exploring the tradition of whaikorero (Broughton 2005, July 7th). Whaikorero is a codified form of oratory, which is central to the formal interactions that take place on the marae. Considering that Maori culture is based in oral traditions, Broughton's choice is a profoundly significant one.

Whaikorero may be understood within the wider ritual of marae interaction, which, although varying to some degree between iwi, follows a protocol that is recognised by most Maori. Preceding the whaikorero, manuhiri (visitors) are called onto the marae by a kuia (female elder) of the tangata whenua with a karanga (a song/call of welcome). As manuhiri approach the marae, there may be a wero (challenge) by a warrior of the tangata whenua, who lays down a token to manuhiri that, if accepted, allows admittance to the marae of the tangata whenua. Strictly speaking, the marae is the open area before a wharenuī (meeting house) but it may also refer to a larger set of buildings or a space that has been prepared, through Maori protocols, as a place for the community to gather. The place of gathering for the whaikorero may vary – inside the wharenuī or in front – but on all marae the manuhiri are seated opposite and facing the tangata whenua.<sup>2</sup>

Whaikorero refers to a series of speeches by representatives of the manuhiri and tangata whenua. These speakers stand between the two parties and, one at a time, address those who are gathered. These speeches call upon traditional chants and mythology as well as discussing the reasons for the Hui (gathering/meeting).

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<sup>2</sup> My consideration of whaikorero and wider marae ritual makes use of "A Whaikorero Reader", compiled by R.T. Mahuta for a course at the University of Waikato in 1984. I am grateful to Te Rita Papesch for sharing her knowledge of whaikorero and Tikanga Maori. She points out that a PhD study of whaikorero was, at the time of writing, being produced in Maori. Thank you also to Emma Johnston and Mark James Hamilton for their advice.

Anthropologist Anne Salmond suggests that in these exchanges the whaikorero speaker is a “consummate actor” whose performance can transform the marae into theatre (Salmond 1975, 147). Of the limited literature that exists on whaikorero, many refer to Salmond’s *Hui: A Study of Maori Ceremonial Gatherings* (1975), which compares prominent speakers to well-known actors who are keenly followed by audiences and requested to perform at different hui throughout the country.

Yet, the significant differences between theatre and marae are also evident in the distance between the idea of the actor and whaikorero speaker. Generally, the actor within Western conventions of theatre is considered an individual, distinguished from the audience by the assuming of a role. The whaikorero speaker, on the other hand, is explicitly acknowledged as a representative of the collective, stepping forth from that collective in order to speak for them. Though the term whaikorero may be applied to all speech-making that takes place on the marae, there is a distinction between those who speak generally and the recognised whaikorero speaker. This speaker is usually distinguished as a kaumatua (a male elder) who has learnt a myriad of ancient chants, proverbs and references to local history as a means of legitimating his right to speak on behalf of his iwi (tribe). As Chris Balme notes in *Decolonizing the Stage* (1999), there is no role-play in whaikorero and the audience will not give applause for a performance as in Western theatre; rather the audience is likely to support, respond to and challenge the whaikorero speaker as representatives of manuhiri or tangata whenua with verbal and physical responses, including haka and waiata.

However, this means that whaikorero is *not* a solo performance in the way I have been discussing it, despite the way it may appear to outsiders. So, what does it mean when Broughton says he deliberately wrote *Michael James Manaia* as a solo

performance based in *whaikorero*? What is the significance of a performance of *whaikorero* by an actor without a collective behind him? Who does he represent? And who is the audience to whom he speaks: *manuhiri*, *tangata whenua*, both, or something other?

In this chapter, I explore these questions by considering how the creators of *Michael James Manaia* use the idea of *whaikorero* in a theatrical performance. To start with, it can be said that the exploration of the relationship between the character of *Manaia* and the communities to which he belongs is the central focus of the performance, and something that might only be worked out through the coming together of the performer and audience. That is to say, the creators of *Michael James Manaia*, beginning with Broughton's decision to explore *whaikorero* as a solo performance, deliberately come to ask questions of the audience concerning bicultural identity in New Zealand. In particular, this solo performance appears directed at Maori and Pakeha as the original partners that established New Zealand as a nation. Let me explain this further by differentiating between the solo performances I have been considering.

As with *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues*, in *Michael James Manaia* the aloneness of the actor on stage may be seen to represent a sense of isolation; the idea of performance is to represent that isolation and, in doing so, attempt to find a sense of community with those who might share similar or related experiences. But if the return of Mason and Thompson to their respective pasts is symptomatic of a *claim* by Pakeha to post-colonial indigeneity, *Michael James Manaia* reflects the attempts by Maori to *reclaim* an indigenous heritage suppressed in the colonial process. *Michael James Manaia* is not autobiographical in the same way as are *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* where the playwright-



turned-actor recalls his youth. This is a play, written by someone other than the performer, and it has been directed as a piece of theatre (Colin McColl) for an established theatre company (Downstage in Wellington). The play represents the life of a fictional character – it is not about the performer's life or his history directly.

However, the character of Manaia does draw on the experiences of Broughton and Moriarty as Maori: an ancestry that is both Maori and Pakeha but where the socio-economic perspective of the latter has all but replaced the communal basis for traditional Maori life. The majority of Maori now live in the urban centres of New Zealand rather than on marae. This has affected the communal aspects of a traditional Maori culture based on a series of interrelated groupings that include whanau (immediate and extended family), and which extends to hapu (sub-tribe) and iwi. Through the course of the narrative in *Michael James Manaia*, the character of Manaia increasingly returns to Maori myths and perspectives, suggesting that this way of life may be in the process of being reclaimed.

The aloneness of Moriarty-as-Manaia on stage may be seen to comment upon and confront the issues that come with such a 'return'. In particular, *Michael James Manaia* may be seen to confront the problem of defining what exactly it means to be 'Maori'. The term only came into existence after contact with Europeans; pre-contact Maori identified as separate and distinctive iwi. These distinctive groups still exist. However, Maori have intermarried with Pakeha and others to the point that Maori identity includes a diverse range of heritages beyond those that existed pre-contact. Complicating an already complex issue is the way Christianity, introduced as a colonial tool by the missionaries who preceded large-scale settlement in the nineteenth century, has been incorporated into Maoritanga. Arguably, contemporary Maori culture is infused with a Christian ethic that exceeds that of Pakeha culture

(recently, Pakeha have a tendency to covet the spiritual link they perceive Maori to have with the land). What this means is that the question of Maori identity is not only of central importance to Maori but also to Pakeha and others who have an interest in the formulations of national identity in contemporary New Zealand.

*Michael James Manaia* may be seen to engage with these questions. Indeed, as a performance paradigm, marae is an especially suitable for solo performance as I have been discussing it – a meeting place where the discussion of issues that are important to those gathered reflects and creates a sense of community and a collective identity. To explore this idea I want to look at the relationship between performer and audience in whaikorero and then consider this in relation to Mason and Thompson as solo performers. This will establish a context by which to analyse the meeting of marae and theatre in *Michael James Manaia*. I do not mean to suggest that I will consider solo performance strictly within the paradigm of marae anymore than I have considered solo performance from the point of view of conventional theatre. These forms of performance sit somewhere between stricter definitions; they are not-quite-theatre, not-quite-not-theatre and, in this instance, not-quite-marae, not-quite-not-marae. However, I think that a better understanding of solo performance as a community-building exercise is obtainable when it is compared with an indigenous form. I want to examine how, through the character of Manaia, the creators of *Michael James Manaia* use the flexibility within the ritual structure of whaikorero – sometimes crossing boundaries of protocol in an attempt to reach and affect an audience – as a means of confronting a New Zealand audience with their national identity.

Perhaps the most striking parallel between whaikorero and the solo performances I have been looking at is the solo speaker attempting to ground identity

by making reference to the past, people and place. In whaikorero, the speaker asserts his right to speak by establishing a historical relationship with the land. This includes reciting whakapapa (genealogy), an explanation of how his ancestors came to the land, and reference to local landmarks such as rivers, lakes, mountains, beaches, and forests. It may also involve the recalling of past events that reveal the place of the land and people within strands of whakapapa. He also does this as a way of allowing others to make connections between his whanau, hapu and iwi. The whaikorero speaker reflects the notion that Maori identity in the present is inherently intertwined with the past and the future, and inseparably bound up with the land, referred to by Maori as Papatuanuku (Papa – the earth mother). Many of the gestures and rituals that are included in whaikorero such as haka, make connections between the performer and his association with the land.

Often the whaikorero speaker will refer to myths, many of which include the stories of Papa. In particular, the performer will often make reference to the creation myth in which Tane (God of the forests and of man) separated Papa from Rangiui (Rangi – the sky father). In this myth, Tane lies upon his mother and presses his feet against the body of his father; Tane's actions allowed for light and therefore life to enter into the world and subsequently led to the creation of man. As a story of origins, this narrative serves as a foundation for the whaikorero speaker's performance, acknowledging the ultimate source from which whakapapa lines descend in Aotearoa. He often uses this and other myths in variations that suit the purposes of a particular speech, returning to the stories throughout his performance, tying them in with contemporary events that are pertinent to the particular take (issues) discussed at a hui. His skill in doing so adds to and supports his mana and thereby the mana of the iwi he represents. In many ways, it seems that referring to myth may also be a kind of

whakapapa, a way of connecting the issues being discussed in the hui in relation to a wider history and lore, acknowledging its importance in a context that is shared by those gathered.

According to Charles Royal in his Ph.D. thesis *Te Whare Tapere: Towards a Model for Maori Performance Art* (1998), the story of Rangi and Papa serves as the origins of Te Ao Marama: the Maori perspective. Royal says that the story of Rangi, Papa and Tane is a “pan-iwi” myth that unifies otherwise distinct groups into a unique grouping with a shared outlook (Royal 1998, 47). He suggests that for Maori, Te Ao Marama is likely to be the foundation to any indigenous form of theatre. Royal has gone on to establish ‘Orotokare’, an organization that looks to build an indigenous theatre and to create performing arts that refer back to the founding myths of Maori culture. His approach to theatre calls upon and revives a traditional concept of Maori performing arts: Te Whare Tapere. Compared to the concept of Theatre Marae with which Broughton and Moriarty are working, there seems to be a greater emphasis in Te Whare Tapere on approaching performance from the direction of movement.<sup>3</sup> This seems different to the text and voice-based work of Theatre Marae. At the same time, a performance such as *Michael James Manaia* that uses the principle of whaikorero, gives scope for spoken word interspersed with waiata and haka as a way of reaching the audience.

Both Theatre Marae and Te Whare Tapere often call upon foundational myths to ground identity. This is much like the whaikorero speaker who recites the story of Rangi and Papa, to establish, literally and symbolically, the place where, like Tane, he stands; it is the place where he belongs, his home – his turangawaewae. In *Tikanga Maori: Living by Maori Values*, Hirini Moko Mead suggests that establishing

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<sup>3</sup> This observation is supported by the description of the organization’s work on their website: <http://www.orotokare.org.nz>.

turangawaewae by reference to stories from the past, specific sites, landmarks and people, is an essential part of defining what it means to be Maori. Of turangawaewae,

Mead says:

It is a place where one belongs by right of birth. Turangawaewae represents one spot, one locality on planet earth where an individual can say, 'I belong here. I can stand here without challenge. My ancestors stood here before me. My children will stand here'. The place includes interests in land, with the territory of the hapu and of the iwi. It is a place associated with the ancestors and is full of history. (Mead 2003, 43)

Mead says that the turanga is the “primary locality” associated with the collective and individual identities within it, centring on the marae, circulating to include the urupa (cemetery), the wahi tapu of the hapu (sacred spots), and extending to take in natural landmarks and land blocks that come within the territory of the iwi. These places, their location and history, are remembered in chants and proverbs that the whaikorero speaker performs, thus maintaining as taonga (treasure, highly prized object) the history of his hapu and iwi for future generations.

This concept of turangawaewae – an underlying principle pursued in whaikorero – bears a strong resonance with solo performance as I have been discussing it. For Mason and Thompson, the return to childhood is an attempt to relate Pakeha identity to a particular place. This is a way of confronting the notion that there is an absence of a meaningful history – or a perceived lack in depth (and colour) to the existing history. That is, when Mason in 1959 and then Thompson in 1984 step forward from the community, they do so to establish a sense of connection – a whakapapa perhaps – that has been ignored, neglected or unwanted. Both represent the places where they grew up as mythological sites. They evoke familiar local images such as the beach and small rural town in an attempt to convey a sense of collective understanding, a sense of community – like the whaikorero speaker, Mason and Thompson are establishing a place to stand.

The major difference between the whaikorero speaker and Mason and Thompson is the relationship to the collective gathered to see them. The whaikorero speaker establishes his turangawaewae and whakapapa as he speaks, enacting it freshly with each encounter. But the connection between the whaikorero speaker and iwi is something already established before he speaks, something respected and cherished – allowing him to feel ‘at home’ or reminding him of his home even when visiting a marae that is not his own. Mason and Thompson, on the other hand, are not quite-at-home and are in the process of finding out where that might be, by calling to mind images that others might recognise and share.

As Pakeha, Mason and Thompson may not be tangata whenua – not native to the land in the same way as are Maori – but they have an association with the land that is different from any other. This is what they relate through their solo performances. By travelling between isolated communities they attempt to illuminate the threads between a larger iwi and the land. That is, Mason and Thompson attempt to make a connection between themselves and the audience that reveals a social and historical relationship as the basis for a community and a sense of identity. Both reconsider old forms and sayings – their inheritance from a former home – in the context of this new setting. They establish new and different combinations that might further cultivate a sense of turangawaewae, while, at the same time, coming to see the possibilities that might come with searching for an identity.

The use of whaikorero in *Michael James Manaia* makes the troubled relationship between individual and community, between performer and audience, the point of the performance – a hui that discusses issues relevant to performer and audience. To continue with the marae comparison, as a solo whaikorero, *Michael James Manaia* might be considered a theatricalization of the ‘returning son’ who has

been estranged from his iwi, still connected in some way, and looking to revive that connection as a way of dealing with a current sense of unease. He uses the whaikorero form to explore a troubled identity. In seeking a connection between himself and the audience, he reveals along the way a schism between the Maori and Pakeha identities that rage within him, thus implicating and challenging a wider bicultural audience. To appreciate the way the 'returning son' is used in *Michael James Manaia*, I want to consider its recurrence as a theme within literature and theatre as a reflection of a re-emerging Maori identity in the 1970s. As we shall see, *Michael James Manaia*, written from the perspective of 1991, comments upon this development in a way that is critically provocative.

The 'returning son' may be seen to reflect Maori resentment following the Second World War and led to a cultural renaissance in the 1970s. Historian Ranginui Walker suggests this discontent grew with the increased migration of Maori from rural marae to the urban centres of Pakeha in search of the "'big three' factors of work, money and pleasure" (Walker 2004, 198) and the inability of successive governments, despite pleas from Maori leaders, to respond to the problems that came with Maori urbanisation. Michael King suggests that the urbanisation of Maori undermined the traditional centre of Maori culture around the marae, as the Pakeha socio-economic conditions of the urban environment challenged such notions as extended family, links to a specific place, and Maori language (King 2003, 472). On the other hand, both Walker and King point to the growing collaboration that took place between Maori leaders who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to form urban marae-based communities, creating a greater sense of a wider Maori identity. Spurred on by the anti-war movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, and the student riots in Paris in 1968, urban Maori groups such as Nga Tamatoa (the Young Warriors) began

to protest the treatment of Maori. At the same time, the Maori Land March (1975), the occupation of Bastion Point (1977) and the arrival of the Mana Motuhake Party were expressions of what Walker characterises as “Nga Tau Tohetohe/Years of Anger” (1987). These movements reflected and encouraged a radicalised Maori culture, particularly amongst younger urban Maori, who attempted to reclaim Maori identity by looking back to the traditional ways with a view to securing a revitalised Maori culture in the present and for the future. In particular, there was a renewed focus on pursuing the rights promised by the Treaty of Waitangi such as Maori sovereignty (tino rangatiratanga), and a demand to redress historical grievances, especially the theft of Maori land.

King points out that part of this movement involved the emergence of Maori writers and artists who began to reconsider what it meant to be Maori (King 2003, 484). This reconsideration involved a return to forms of traditional Maoritanga as a means of reviving a culture all but lost, the perspective of the English partners of the Treaty having almost replaced Te Ao Marama. It is in this context that a motif such as the ‘returning son’ arose. It may have been a way of reflecting the dilemma that faced Maori as a culture, all but losing the strands of its heritage and finding strength in a return to the past, but wondering how traditional values can be maintained and how the culture is to survive, let alone thrive. A significant figure within this movement was, for example, Witi Ihimaera. Ihimaera is credited with pioneering a Maori literature by attempting to combine the oral traditions of whaikorero with the Western traditions of literature. It is possible to see works such as *Tangi* (1973) as attempts to do this, revising and amalgamating different forms and styles in an effort to maintain by innovation – a literalising of whaikorero perhaps, “resuscitating the myths that bind his culture together” (Corballis and Garrett 1984, 35). The result is an open-



endedness in form that speaks of the uncertainty and the potential of a culture that is attempting to work itself out after the trauma of colonisation. The unsettledness of this situation is reflected in the narrative. It crosses continuously between past and present as the central protagonist, Tama (whose experience and physical description closely mirror that of Ihimaera), attempts to come to terms with the recent death of his father. Tama also has to deal with the secret he never told his father: that his (Tama's) mother was raped by a group of Pakeha men – an allusion, it seems likely, to the way Maori felt as a result of the colonisation of their culture. Form and content align in an attempt to work out a significant individual and social trauma, a theme later taken up by Broughton and other playwrights such as Hone Kouka and Briar Grace-Smith in the late 1980s and 1990s. There is the sense of an emerging Maori voice, a conversation that begins to use literary and then theatrical forms to work through significant social and political issues affecting Maori and Pakeha.

Whereas Ihimaera looked to maintain Maori cultural forms by adapting them to literature, the 'Theatre Marae' experiments by playwrights such as Broughton, Kouka and Grace-Smith and practitioners such as Moriarty, may be seen as an attempt to return to the performance-oriented traditions of marae.<sup>4</sup> Playwrights and practitioners may be seen to carry on the attempts by writers such as Ihimaera, Patricia Grace and Keri Hulme to record traditional aspects of Maori culture in the written form, carrying on to experiment with the performative aspects of Maori culture in relation to theatre. Theatre Marae attempts to work between Maori and Pakeha culture by observing the literary tradition of English culture, where the recorded word comes to be staged, and the performance based rituals of marae where movement and voice convey history, myths and stories of a collective past.

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, Moriarty looked to combine his theatrical experience with "issue-driven theatre" as he became involved with groups such as Te Ika a Maui Players and the political group Nga Tamatoa. Moriarty discusses this with Glassey and Welham (2003).

Before *Michael James Manaia*, for instance, Broughton and Moriarty had collaborated on several Theatre Marae projects with Broughton writing the scripts for Moriarty to direct. *Te Hokinga Mai* (1988) is one such example. Broughton wrote *Te Hokinga Mai* under the banner of Te Rakau Hua O Te Tapu, a trust co-established by Moriarty in 1989 to work with troubled youth. Broughton explained to me that he wrote the play to celebrate the New Zealand tour of the Te Maori exhibition that had travelled through the United States with great success between 1984 and 1986 – the title of the subsequent tour through New Zealand was titled, ‘Te Hokinga Mai/The Return Home’ (Broughton 2005, July 7th). He began writing the play for Roger Hall’s playwriting course at the University of Otago, and the narrative bears a resemblance to *Michael James Manaia*: a Pakeha soldier returning from Vietnam visits the marae of his fallen comrade and is welcomed by the whanau. In the introduction to *Te Hokinga Mai*, Hall notes that the play stands out from other theatre work in New Zealand, by working within the protocol and forms of marae (Broughton 1990, 3). In *Te Hokinga Mai*, the Pakeha character goes through rituals such as wero, karanga by kuia, and whaikorero by the kaumatua of the tangata whenua. According to Hall, this kind of amalgamation marks a new kind of theatre in New Zealand, both for a Maori audience constructing a post-colonial identity and, especially, for a Pakeha audience uncomfortable around Maori culture (Broughton 1990, 3).

Broughton also stresses the success of *Te Hokinga Mai* in expanding the idea of whaikorero to represent elements of tapu (such as death) that had hindered previous productions.<sup>5</sup> Broughton suggests that this experimentation with form in *Te Hokinga Mai* is an example of the potential of Theatre Marae, which he defines in opposition to what he calls ‘Marae Theatre’ (Broughton 2005, July 7th). In general, practitioners

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of Hone Tuwhare’s *Hat in the Wilderness* and *Te Hokinga Mai* in Balme (1988).

and those writing about hybrid theatre/marae creations use these terms interchangeably. Broughton, though, refers to Marae Theatre as a representation of marae ritual within the wider framework of Western theatre, and therefore reflecting a colonial process that tends to use Maoriness as an exotic façade to an English oriented culture. Broughton told me that performances of this kind could be traced back to Mason's *The Pohutukawa Tree*. Theatre Marae is, according to Broughton, a hybrid form but leaning towards Te Ao Marama in an attempt to make performance socially efficacious. The clearest sign of this is the inclusion of a discussion after the performance. Broughton says that *Te Hokinga Mai* is perhaps one of the most successful examples of Theatre Marae, judging by the effect it had on the school children that saw the production when it toured around New Zealand in the late 1980s. Broughton suggests that these performances were regularly followed by intense and extended exchanges about the place of war in the lives of New Zealanders.

However, in the way it establishes the relationship between spectator and performer, *Te Hokinga Mai* seems oriented more towards Marae Theatre than Theatre Marae (according to the way Broughton defines them). It seems that Broughton's attempt to create an efficacious performance draws from the directness of marae and whaikorero in particular, however *Te Hokinga Mai* appears closer in form to the separation of performer and spectator that takes place in conventional Western theatre, where the spectator is positioned as a voyeur to the action on stage. In keeping with the Aristotelian conventions upon which Western theatre is based, *Te Hokinga Mai* tends towards a resolution between the characters on stage, limiting, perhaps, the engaging relationship (conflict) between performers and audience suggested by marae. Dramatic tension is created in a series of flashbacks, the

character of the Pakeha soldier (Marty) recounting how his growing friendship with the character of the Maori soldier (J-J) transforms his Pakeha suspicion and hostility towards Maori culture. The Pakeha soldier begins to understand, and accept Maori culture:

J-J was my friend.  
I just wanted you to know that my friend taught me a hell of a lot.  
But for me, the most incredible thing of all, what really gets me, was that I had to leave New Zealand, my home, and go overseas to a bloody war, to find the treasures on my own doorstep. (Broughton 1990, 52)

This implies that through coming to know Maori culture, Pakeha can move beyond manuhiri status and become grounded. Pakeha can, as the character Marty says, become “white on the outside with a brown heart on the inside” (1990, 53).

Ultimately, the union of Pakeha and Maori is symbolised in the concluding act of the play. A waiata (action song) is performed for the audience in which Marty sings along and “does his best” to follow the actions of the whanau. The play ends with the character of the Maori mother placing the pounamu pendent of her dead son around the neck of the Pakeha character. In this way, it is implied that Pakeha have found a new home and family.

In many ways, this resolution seems quite simplistic and idealistic in a way that is out of keeping with the fraught relationship between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand. While it attempts to point towards the possibilities of engaging with Maori culture, the representation of that culture seems romantic, especially in the way it suggests a sense of wholeness and completeness to Maori culture. That is, Maori culture is represented in *Te Hokinga Mai* as a happy and unified society, which seems a nostalgic vision that is contradicted by contemporary bicultural relations in New Zealand, and especially by a Maori culture battling to establish a sense of self.

The problematic seamless resolution in *Te Hokinga Mai* calls to mind wider criticism of attempts to adapt Maori culture. Through this criticism, a persistent question is raised concerning how to represent Maoritanga without rendering it obsolete – that is, as window dressing to a Western based culture. Ihimaera, for example, has rewritten a number of his works, including *Tangi*, because he felt the originals were too oriented towards a Western perspective – perhaps an acknowledgement of criticism that his work romanticised Maori life for a Pakeha audience. Ihimaera has rewritten *Tangi* as the first part of a larger book called *The Rope of Man*, drawing on the Maori idea of Te Taura Tangata: a great spiralling rope that stretches from the beginning of time till its end, perhaps a visual metaphor for the rope-like strands of whaikorero and whakapapa. The second part is called ‘The Return’ and considers the place of Maori in the new millennium. At the same time, Ihimaera’s revisions, like the film based on his novel *Whale Rider*, have been criticized for watering down the cultural differences that appear in the originals in order to appeal to an international market.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of global capitalism on Maori culture – making it into a more easily digested product – have been increasing over the last two decades. Of the ‘Te Maori’ exhibition in 1984, Peter Gathercole has pointed to a fundamental problem for Maori culture. He says the exhibition “looked back to, even reified, a Maori past that, however important to emphasize, nonetheless remained the past” (Gathercole 2002, 278). This seems to suggest that for a Maori audience of these works, there is a renewed sense of identity by representing the past but little in the way of exploring how to live in contemporary society. Furthermore, this work is also directed towards a Western audience and one hungry for their own sense of grounding in a cynical and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Evans 2007, 184-185.

disillusioned, post-modern consumer society – the exhibition, therefore, is packaged in a way that is amenable to that audience. This nullifies the possibilities that might come with a challenge from Maori culture to a broader, supposedly established national identity. By the same token, examples of Theatre Marae (or Marae Theatre) such as *Te Hokinga Mai* may also point to the problems that come with basing ideas of marae *within* the frame of conventional Western theatre. It may smother, for example, the potentially confrontational aspect that is part of the marae; a confrontational approach would help address what is relevant to the community – that is, it may invigorate a radical political theatre rather than affirm everyday ‘truths’ in the usual way of politically conservative, conventional theatre. This muting effect seems likely in *Te Hokinga Mai*, Balme, for example, referring to the overly “sentimental and melodramatic” aspects of the coming-together of Pakeha and Maori (Balme 1999, 74).

I have raised this criticism in order to establish the different approach taken with *Michael James Manaia* as a solo performance and as a form of political theatre. The fact that Broughton starts with the idea of whaikorero rather than a conventional form of theatre, initiates an especially indigenous perspective in a post-colonial culture. What makes the performance remarkable is that by turning whaikorero into a solo performance, it is immediately possible to make a comment about the separation between the individual and community in Maori culture. If the whaikorero speaker usually has the tangata whenua at his back, the character of Manaia is alone on stage. What is implied is that he might come to find a sense of community by engaging with the audience to whom he speaks directly. In a way that is different to *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues*, the form of *Michael James Manaia* is based in a search for identity through the exploration of the past. In this way, it might be said

that in *Michael James Manaia* – more so than even *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* – form is content. Moriarty-as-Manaia is not-quite a whaikorero speaker in the sense that he is disconnected from iwi. However, he is not-quite-not the whaikorero speaker either in the way he comes to seek out that connection by an exploration of whakapapa in relation to the audience.

Seeing a recording of the performance in the company of Broughton in 2005, I was struck by the connection between the individual story and its social dimension. I thought they were inseparable. The two overlap when Moriarty-as-Manaia begins vigorously scratching himself, especially in moments when he becomes anxious. In a preface to the performance text titled “Michael James Manaia – The man and his place”, Broughton describes the character of Manaia:

[U]nkempt, unshaven and looks like the left over from a three day binge. He has the peculiar habit of continually scratching himself, especially his forearms and the back of his neck”. (Broughton 1994, 12)

This scratching is never directly explained by Moriarty-as-Manaia, although it is implied, as the plot unravels, that it is the effects of poisoning by Agent Orange. At the same time, when I first read the text, perhaps taking my cue from the word “habit”, I imagined that this might be something psychosomatic, in some way symbolic of a character that is not comfortable in his own skin. I thought this might reflect an identity that is caught between different cultural values – an identity that is dis-eased. The idea of a deformed child – the progeny perhaps of biculturalism – also suggests such a reading.

When I put this to Broughton – that the character of Manaia might represent a cultural dis-ease – he was reluctant to read beyond the individual level. He suggested that many readings might be possible (Broughton 2005, interview with author). He responded to suggestions of reading beyond or through Manaia – as I have done in

terms of *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* – with an insistence that this was reality: “That’s just the way it is”, he would say. He seemed to be wary of making any symbolic readings of the text, perhaps concerned that any interpretation of *Manaia* as representative of Maori culture might limit the potential for the play to be read beyond narrow cultural confines. That is, Broughton might have been concerned about being pigeonholed as a *Maori* playwright. He said that *Michael James Manaia* transcends cultural barriers that make it a Maori story, making it one that might be understood by Pakeha and beyond. It is, he said, a “universal story” (Broughton 2005, interview with author).

At the same time, the choices made in the production point to an identity crisis firmly planted in a specific social historical context. It may be that in representing “the way it is” the creators reveal something more, each voice – playwright, actor, director, designer, musician – finding something that resonates with the specific time and place. This is something that became apparent to me as I came into contact with the performance: first by hearing people talk about it, then by reading the text and, then, seeing a recording of the performance with Broughton. I get the sense that this was a project that very much developed *in between* those that were involved, the kind of collaborative process that is unusual for theatre in New Zealand, and, again, perhaps in keeping with the communal aspects of *marae*.

With this in mind, I want to consider the way in which this collaboration is reported to have come together and how it may have affected the production. That is, I want to examine how the different voices that were part of this production may have led to the kind of social readings that I saw when I first watched the recording of the production. It would appear, for instance, that the closer contact between Moriarty and Broughton in creating *Manaia* established a remarkable dynamic. As opposed to



Broughton writing a finished script that comes to be directed by someone like Moriarty, *Michael James Manaia* evolved over a series of late night meetings while Moriarty was performing another play in Dunedin. Broughton had come up with the initial idea of a performance based on a popular television commercial of the time, in which a soldier serving in Vietnam is sent a 'Dear John' letter on a cassette tape. The advertisement was for a brand of cassette tape. From this idea, Broughton began writing the first pieces of text. Moriarty became involved shortly after – claiming the part as his own after reading the first part of the monologue – and the two workshopped and developed the script together: Broughton writing, Moriarty acting it out, Broughton rewriting, and so on (Broughton 1994, 11). In this way, Moriarty may be seen to create the play in performance as much as Broughton does on the page. This process seems to have allowed Moriarty to embody the character of Manaia, perhaps in a way that is more in keeping with whaikorero than the assumption of role in traditional Western theatre. I remember, at the time, hearing reports of Moriarty's performance as Manaia as something extraordinarily confronting and compelling, and I could see this even in the recording of the performance (usually a poor indicator of the quality of live performance). I was even led to believe that Moriarty *was* Manaia by someone who had seen the performance and was unable to distinguish actor from role, such was the physical intensity of Moriarty's performance. Perhaps in a way that is closer to Mason and Thompson in their solo performances, *Michael James Manaia* was a performance that allowed Moriarty to speak directly to an audience about issues that were deeply important to him.

With *Michael James Manaia*, Moriarty and Broughton may be seen to have taken a step back to reconsider their professional experience and their work with Te Rakau. The role of Manaia that they came to construct reflects their respective

experiences as Maori and as professionals working in the health sector – both have worked with health issues related to Maori specifically. Broughton, for instance, who was initially a dentist, became a lecturer at the Otago University Centre for Preventative Medicine as an expert on Maori health. He also spent a number of years as a medical officer in the Territorials. Moriarty, on the other hand, has trained as a psychiatric nurse, working in hospitals where group therapy was a central practice. He has continued to experiment with such methods in his work with Te Rakau, using theatre as a form of therapy to help get individuals back into the wider community after serving jail sentences and to help those that might be at risk of doing so.

It seems that creating *Manaia* in dialogue with Broughton allowed Moriarty to approach Theatre Marae in a different way to his usual practice with Te Rakau. As a play, *Michael James Manaia* can be distinguished from Moriarty's work with prison inmates and troubled youth by the way it aggressively engages with the social implications of work that deals mostly, but not exclusively, with Maori. Maori are disproportionately represented in prison populations and crime statistics in New Zealand. Usually, the Te Rakau model appears to focus on this problem at an individual rather than a social level. The therapeutic approach used by Te Rakau looks to help those within prisons or preventative detention units come to terms with past trauma as a means of being reintegrated back into society. While Susan Battye and Alan Scott,<sup>7</sup> who have worked closely with Te Rakau, claim that there is a political dimension to this work, such possibilities seem to be secondary to, and possibly undermined by, the therapeutic model. That is, the assigning of sole responsibility for illegal or anti-social behaviour to individuals may override the possibility of seeing the social dimensions of these problems.

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<sup>7</sup> See Battye (2002) and Scott (2006).

Scott, for example, claims that the mostly white, middle class festival audience of recent Te Rakau productions in prisons are made to consider the social ramifications of the personal stories that are recounted for them. He refers to *Kia Maumahara* in particular, which was a performance by inmates within Christchurch Women's prison for the 1997 Christchurch Arts Festival.<sup>8</sup> However, talking to people who attended the performance, my impression was that the experience was thrilling because it created a titillating vicinity to authentic criminals, exacerbated by an environment that was terrifyingly real. A reconsideration of the social circumstances was completely absent; rather, these responses suggest that there was a certain amount of relief that such 'bad eggs' are 'human after all' and on the road to recovery. It seems more likely that these middle class audiences were happy that rehabilitation would mean that they and their possessions would be left alone. Recently, the use of the Te Rakau model for the musical *Once Were Warriors*<sup>9</sup> seems to undermine, or to be at the expense of, the social examination that is associated with Alan Duff's influential novel (1990) and the subsequent film (1994). In many ways, it seems closer to the colonial form of *Te Hokinga Mai* by re-presenting the conflict and its resolution on stage, as the protagonists are seen to come into realignment with a larger identity that is shared or known by the audience. What the audience is told is that they should support these individuals in changing. The audience's own culpability in a wider socio-economic system and how this might create the conditions for crime in the first place is not considered.

On the other hand, that the audience seeing *Michael James Manaia* want to "crawl under their seats" (Scott 2006, online citation) when the character of Manaia

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<sup>8</sup> *Kia Maumahara*, (Let Us Remember) directed by Jim Moriarty at the Christchurch's Women's Prison for the Christchurch Arts Festival (1997). *Watea* (Pathways to Freedom) directed by Jim Moriarty was produced at the same prison for the Christchurch Arts Festival in 1999.

<sup>9</sup> *Once Were Warriors: The Musical Drama* directed by Jim Moriarty at the Christchurch Theatre Royal (2004).

describes killing his child, is, I would argue, related to the performance's evocation of experience that is both individual and social. In particular, this may be seen in the way that the production of *Michael James Manaia* plays upon the idea of the group therapy session to reveal the social and political dimensions to such gatherings. That is, *Michael James Manaia* as a piece of theatre has the potential to re-present the ideas that may be latent in the group therapy sessions that, in Te Rakau work for instance, are so often attended by Maori. To understand what I mean by this, I turn now to discuss how some of the other collaborators became involved with the production of *Michael James Manaia*. These collaborators were behind the decision to set the play as if within a group therapy session. While the source of *Michael James Manaia* as a socially critical performance lay in the original conversation between Broughton and Moriarty, it is clear that the social dimension of the work was focused by those who came to create the performance at Downstage in 1991.

In many ways, *Michael James Manaia* may be seen as a kind of hui between a group of collaborators working in Theatre Marae. Director Colin McColl, for example, is a co-founder of Taki Rua (originally known as The Depot), a collective that was founded in 1983 with the aim of creating hybrid theatre-marae productions. A prominent example was the premiere in 1994 of Hone Kouka's *Nga Tangata Toa*,<sup>10</sup> directed by McColl, and featuring Moriarty in the role of Taneatua. Using Henrik Ibsen's tragedy *The Vikings of Helgeland* as a model, Kouka represents the story of a returned Maori soldier from the First World War who becomes embroiled in an unresolved family dispute that eventually pits him against his Pakeha brother-in-law and former comrade in arms (William, referred to most often as Wi). It is possible to see here a repetition of themes from plays such as *Te Hokinga Mai*, particularly in

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<sup>10</sup> *Nga Tangata Toa*, directed by Colin McColl for Taki Rua (1994). It is interesting to note that Kouka also began his theatre career by writing and performing a solo performance, *Mauri Tu* (1991).

representing 'war' in relation to Maori identity – a relationship that, as I shall discuss in a moment, is significant for wider formulations of national identity.

*Michael James Manaia* seems directed towards critiquing this kind of identity, by representing the Maori warrior as an isolated figure as if he were part of a group therapy session. This conceit sees Moriarty-as-Manaia talking to the audience as if they were participants in this event, whether as fellow patients, doctors or something else, is deliberately unclear. Broughton suggests that the idea of the group therapy session came from the Downstage crew, his own ideas of setting being abstractly defined as “inside [Manaia’s] head” (Broughton 1994, 12). The decision to work with the idea of the therapy session may be seen to comment upon/provoke the social dimension of such a gathering: a combination of the material props of a therapy session represented by the chairs, with an earth covered stage and the head and shoulders of a large angel suspended above the stage. The effect is intriguing. Although the angel refers to an incident described in the narrative, where the character of Manaia remembers his brother’s discovery of an angel carving in his father’s war chest – booty from Europe during the Second World War – in the Downstage production, Moriarty makes no explicit reference to the angel, or any other part of the set in performance. Perhaps the only indication of Manaia’s circumstances in the Downstage production is a line added to the original text, which indicates a performance intermission: “Look, my head hurts, can we take a break?” (Broughton 1991, VHS recording).

I think what makes this set so effective is that it demands reflection in relation to Manaia as a character, and upon doing so a social reading is likely. The confusion that might come from working within the conceit of the group therapy session is, in a strange way, clarified by the abstraction of the larger setting; the symbolism of the set

positions the spectator to be active, to *read*, in a way that they might not were the setting to be naturalistic. The group therapy session may be seen as a series of solo performances in which the individual returns to his past as a means of coming to terms with his present, the aim being to rehabilitate him back into society. The situation in *Michael James Manaia* is re-presented in a setting that calls attention to the relationship between the personal and the social. The character of Manaia may be like many individuals who find themselves in group therapy; however, the setting also suggests that he be seen as representative of a New Zealand culture caught between different cultural values. That is, he is caught between a Maori perspective that is very much of the earth and the angelic heights of a Judeo-Christian tradition in European culture that informs the perspective of Pakeha.

It is possible to see this arrangement as a re-examination of the creation myth of Te Ao Marama post-colonisation, and particularly since the 1970s when the Maori voice gathered power. The character of Manaia plays the part of Tane, suspended between Rangi and Papa, and attempting to stand by working out where his turangawaewae might be in the present circumstances. His stance, though, is uneasy, he is unable to stand still, scratching and shifting constantly – a mirror to a restless Maori *and* New Zealand culture. Again, the question of whether the audience are doctors or fellow patients becomes disturbingly urgent. The performer is not so alone as he first appears and this becomes increasingly apparent as he recounts his past.

Moriarty-as-Manaia points to this throughout the performance. Playing Manaia, Moriarty often seems confused and uncertain, looking to the audience for some kind of understanding. By this I do not mean that he is looking for sympathy from the audience, rather he looks to understand his situation by asking the audience if they understand or might explain it to him. Not only does this make the audience

active during the performance, it implies that they are, as possible helpers, somehow involved in his present state. As he recounts his whakapapa, Moriarty-as-Manaia points out that there is a socio-historical relationship between himself and the audience:

Like the bible says,  
They begat so-and-so,  
Who begat so-and-so,  
Who begat so-and-so,  
Right on down to me.

So that's how we have our Iwi, our tribe,  
Ngati Kahungunu.

You know what "Ngati means?  
Huh?

Ngati means the same as the "Mac" in MacDonald;  
The "O" in O'Reilly;  
And the "Fitz" in Fitzpatrick.  
Yeah that's it.  
They all mean "son of". (Broughton 1994, 17)

On the one hand, this can be read as Maori coming to reclaim their heritage. It seems that the audience is kept in the dark about the reasons for the character's present state because he himself, so to speak, hasn't got a clue. As his story unravels (and he with it) it becomes apparent that his tale is, quite specifically, a Maori one. That is, the return to the past of the Manaia character reveals a dis-ease that may be attributed to the loss of Tikanga Maori and the increasing envelopment in a Western socio-economic system that appears to alienate and isolate. The communal aspect of marae life that is replaced by an urban setting leads to an increasing sense of disorientation and duress culminating in the death of the character's brother. In this light, the character's subsequent joining of the military suggests a desire for a surrogate whanau to replace the sense of community that has been lost in the movement from rural marae to city.

At the same time, the equation of whakapapa to Judeo-Christian and Celtic cultures may also reflect the bicultural nature of Maori identity. This implicates Pakeha as well. First of all, the comparison acknowledges that Maori have genealogy that is likely to include European ancestry. It may also be that such correspondence appeals to a Pakeha audience, suggesting, if not the establishment of a 'new tribe', the existence of one that is beset with troubles. It may also be significant that the comparison between Maori and Pakeha is based on Celtic names, corresponding perhaps to other 'first nation' peoples that have been colonised. It is interesting, for instance, that there are no references to similar terms in English culture such as: Richardson, Williamson or Thompson.

Nonetheless, the overall effect is to unsettle fixed notions of identity, revealing the ways in which they come to war with each other within the character on stage. In other words, the war the character fights is symbolic as well as literal, representing the conflict for Maori (and for New Zealand) of a heritage that is both Maori and Pakeha. This seems to be emphasized by the fact that the character of Manaia is a war baby. Moriarty-as-Manaia explains that he was born to a Maori father who met his English mother while serving in the Maori Battalion in the Second World War – an important allusion given that for both cultures war has played a significant role in the formation of identity. It is, then, significant that in *Michael James Manaia* the conflict between Maori and Pakeha heritages comes to a head in the theatre of war. In the jungle of Vietnam, the character of Manaia seems to empathise with the Vietcong enemy as much as he does the Western Allies whom he serves. This is significant because New Zealand's joining of the conflict in Vietnam on the side of the Americans appears to have been a political solution to an ongoing identity crisis; New Zealand was looking to the US as a replacement big brother for a former English



mother. The character's crisis can be seen as the return of a conflict repressed by the colonial process, returning as a result of a possible re-colonisation of New Zealand as much as Vietnam – the Vietnam War now widely condemned and seen as part of ongoing calculations in advancing American imperialism.

It may then be possible to see the use of whakapapa in *Michael James Manaia* as a sign of New Zealand culture, Maori and Pakeha, coming to look closer to home for a sense of identity – looking to each other. As he comes to remember more of his past, it is as if the character of Manaia makes a conscious mental and social shift from a Pakeha perspective – acquired through assimilation into the dominant Treaty partner's socio-economic system – to a search for the vestiges of his Maoritanga heritage. Past and present collide in Manaia's recollection of a fire-fight in the jungle, Moriarty-as-Manaia reliving the exchange through the Maori myth of Maui's death struggle in the birth canal of Hine Nui Te Po, who crushes him as he attempts to crawl back into the womb. This symbolic death may also be seen as a 'rebirth' in which the character of Manaia 'returns home' to find himself. The character's identification with the Vietcong may be a symbol of resistance to the idea that identity should be formed elsewhere. This is particularly relevant to a Maori culture that had rediscovered a voice through the protests of the 1970s and for a wider New Zealand culture that had, through the 1980s, begun to open itself up to the world with the social and economic reforms of the fourth Labour Government.

Within this socio-historical context, the character's performance of the famous haka 'ka mate, ka mate, ka ora, ka ora' (I live, I live, I die, I die) takes on special significance. Just as the whaikorero speaker turns to waiata and haka in performance, often adding elements to appeal to an audience in the present moment of performance, Broughton instructs that the haka should be performed with actions but without

words. The re-presentation of something as iconic as the haka used by the All Blacks, a symbol of the bicultural New Zealand identity/brand, may be seen to call for a fight against a problem that is endemic within New Zealand cultural in general, and Maoritanga in particular. Rather than simply parading haka and waiata in front of the audience to denote an exotic Other, this re-presentation may be seen to suggest a Maori culture that has been appropriated and left without a voice.

In the reviews of *Michael James Manaia*, most are conscious of the larger social questions raised by the character of Manaia, especially in New Zealand. In *Stage and Radio Record* (June 1991) for instance, Keri Kaa reads the red earth on stage as symbolic of Kurawaka, where bloody sinews – exposed by Tane’s enforced separation of Rangi and Papa – caused the earth to turn red. Kaa observes that this is a “dust-filled arena of confrontation”, and that it is a “fitting place for a warrior to stand and challenge his enemies both seen and unseen” (Kaa 1991, 115). Like others who reviewed the production,<sup>11</sup> she refers to Moriarty’s performance of ‘ka mate, ka mate, ka ora, ka ora’. She suggests that in this moment Manaia becomes Atua (God) performing in a liminal world where the spirits and gods conjugate “representing all our fathers, uncles, brothers and cousins who’ve taken part in a war in a foreign land and come home battle-scarred and haunted by demons” (Kaa 1991, 115). The karakia that Kaa places at the end of the review reflects a perspective that can be read individually as well as socially:

Tama tu tama ora  
Tama moe tama mate  
He who stands and fights – survives.  
He who stands and waits fails. (Kaa 1991, 116)

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<sup>11</sup> The text of *Michael James Manaia* published in 1994 includes a number of reviews.

In the context of Maori culture such words take on special significance. In the context of a wider New Zealand culture looking to work out its identity between Maori and Pakeha, the *karakia* is no less significant.

It is this engagement with New Zealand identity – representing the idea of a bicultural identity through a solo performance – that makes *Michael James Manaia* the most comprehensive example of solo performance as especially suited to the New Zealand context. The representation of the warring factions of Maori *and* Pakeha within the solo performer on stage in relation to a Pakeha and Maori audience who are experiencing a similar tension, most potently conveys the growing pains of New Zealand identity. Such a reading goes against that of Ron Mikalsen who, in his review of *Michael James Manaia*, says that “Manaia alone was, simply, not enough”, because the macho masculine character of Manaia did not offer insight into his situation or the events, which Mikalsen found confusing (Broughton 1991, 117-119). Mikalsen’s account suggests he reads Manaia as an individual without considering that the character and his confusion might reflect a wider New Zealand culture – he tends to read flaws in the play because of an overly realistic interpretation, missing the social symbolism implied by the set. Furthermore, the macho-masculinism that Mikalsen criticises may also be seen to reflect New Zealand culture, continuing similar themes and concerns that appear in *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* – the search for a national identity in each solo performance reflects the tendency to read New Zealand identity in particularly male terms. This kind of mirroring – the ‘man alone’ on stage – allows a community to critique themselves, making these kinds of performance politically relative to the New Zealand experience.

*Michael James Manaia* points to the potential of theatre to be alive in the moment. The effectiveness of *Michael James Manaia* seems due to the collaborative approach in building the performance. Moriarty, for instance, considered the musicians, Cherie O'Shea and Jerry Banse, to be central to the success of the performance with their mix of traditional and contemporary music that interjects, and comments upon, the action. There is a sense that with the collaborative element of *Michael James Manaia*, a number of voices are involved in making the performance, offering different insights into an experience that may be shared, or to which others may relate. There is a sense from the performance, and reading around it, that *Michael James Manaia* was a communal creation, perhaps making the possibility of such a happening between performer and audience all the more possible in performance. The audience are maybe asked to be the final collaborators in the process of making the performance – the ambiguity of the set certainly demands that the audience be active in making meaning.

Consciously or not, the collaborative nature of *Michael James Manaia* seems an acknowledgment that the solo performer is never (entirely) alone and that others have a say/influence over how he lives his life or how he performs on stage. This awareness seems to grow out of the currents of the time, not in spite of them. That is, the collaborative dynamic that seems to result in a discussion about the relationship between the personal and the political comes about through a range of voices offering their point of view. Such a conversation seems to have been developing separately in Maori and Pakeha cultures, relating to their specific experiences. However, in the representation of a bicultural character such as Manaia, alone on stage, it is possible to see these conversations come together. It is through the character of Manaia that an audience may consider the possibility of a larger collective whakapapa and the

problems that may arise with it. *Michael James Manaia* offers questions that are relevant to the time. It presents the different aspects of the fraught relationship between native and settler. These identities are at war within him, which contradicts the usual, official depiction of a harmonious bicultural identity. That is, the audience is directed away from the conventional idea of a New Zealand identity that is resolved and known towards a state of unknowing and uncertainty about what it means to be a New Zealander. The performance offers the possibility for a discussion to follow by ending ‘in motion’, unresolved.

I would like to end this chapter by considering where *Michael James Manaia* might sit in relation to the other solo performances I have looked at. On the one hand, it is possible to see *Michael James Manaia* as moving beyond the search for national identity that is seen in *The End of Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues*. For example, whereas it was an historic first when Mason took *The End of the Golden Weather* to the Edinburgh Festival in 1965, such is the regularity with which such tours now take place, it may have been at the forefront of the minds of those creating *Michael James Manaia*<sup>12</sup>. The focus on international touring might suggest that searching for a national identity with a local audience is no longer necessary. The reviews for *Michael James Manaia* from Edinburgh point to the New Zealand flavour that its creators brought to an already popular (almost generic) ‘Back-in-Nam’ story. This includes familiar references from contemporary television, film and literature: Victor Charlie, Hendrix, Agent Orange, FUBAR. This suggests that the performance might be aimed at a broader audience beyond the confines of New Zealand, its creators displaying market savvy by representing popular images from contemporary culture, and tapping into a genre that, in the 1990s, was all the rage internationally. At that

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<sup>12</sup> Both McColl and Moriarty had travelled to Edinburgh in 1990 with a Downstage production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*.

time, there were, for example, a number of television programmes such as *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty* (as well as a vastly successful soundtrack that features music from the Vietnam era). There were also films such as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* and popular literature such as *Chickenhawk*. Perhaps these products reflect the prevailing of consumer capitalism over the attempted counter-culture revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Vietnam was a rallying call for those who wanted to change the overwhelming capitalistic logic that dictates the drive towards hegemony as part of a greater process of Western imperialism. In the 1990s, the representation of this movement in forms of popular culture, to be consumed as nostalgic flashbacks to an awkward time recently past, perhaps reveals a post-political era. This seems to result in a culture that is increasingly individualistic in a way that seems out of keeping with the communal approach of *Michael James Manaia*.

Yet, as much as the creators of *Michael James Manaia* successfully read the market, they also reveal a resistance to the idea(l) of a fixed and stable identity. Rather than simply reflecting the exoticness of a 'Maori-in-Nam', the dis-ease in both form and content of *Michael James Manaia* suggests a critical approach to the process of identity-fixing. In the context of an increasingly homogenized world, where identity constantly seems to be 'stabilized', a ploy to appeal to larger demographics, the 'return home' to the immediacy of a national experience challenges hegemonic identity. In this way, *Michael James Manaia* re-uses material that is already popular, and, in re-telling it from the Maori perspective, looks to a discussion about collective identity in New Zealand. The suggestion that Manaia identifies as much with the Vietcong as the Western Allies brings to a head the conflict between colonizer and colonized. This conflict seems to be tearing the character of Manaia apart and, in the case of his deformed child, is literally enacted.

In exploring a specifically local identity in this way, working out what it means to be 'native', *Michael James Manaia* is closer to the idea of the actor alone represented in *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues*. For Mason, Thompson, Broughton and Moriarty, the chief question, and one it asks of its audience, is whether what really constitutes identity in New Zealand is as we are told. These solo performances represent a search for a sense of community by representing an idea of New Zealand identity through the solo performer. The search suggests that a larger collective identity is something not entirely known, that it is in the process of being worked out or discovered with an audience. This reflection is in keeping with the reality of identity generally, and in New Zealand specifically, as something that is constantly being re-worked, re-generated and re-hashed through dialogue and debate. Solo performance seems ideally suited to community building because it breaks the usual distance between performer and spectator and asks the audience to reconsider identity as something that is/has developed out of particular influences and events and which are forever changing. In assuming a role and changing roles, the solo performer is able to present himself as a representative of a changing New Zealand.

Paradoxically, this acknowledgement of the transient nature of identity is also a way of grounding identity. The adaptability of solo performance in terms of utilising different forms and styles and in regards to different spaces means it can respond to the changing circumstances of time and place. Toured around New Zealand, *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* contributed to a wider, ongoing discussion about what it means to be a New Zealander. These solo performances reveal that there are different ways of looking at New Zealand identity and identity within New Zealand. At the same time, it is possible to see touring as a means of linking those conversations, of keeping a dialogue present and alive, of the

solo performer making attempts to overcome a sense of isolation by illustrating that there *is* an ongoing conversation. These solo performances suggest that identity is something always moving and in the process of being discovered.



## Chapter Four

### On Tour: 'Fluid' Identities in New Zealand Solo Performance

Although in this chapter I consider a diverse range of solo performances in New Zealand, I do not intend this to be a cataloguing of the also-rans. Rather than considering each in detail in separate chapters, they are placed together in this chapter because of a distinction that groups them in concert. As opposed to seeing the ongoing proclivity towards solo performance in New Zealand as part of (carrying on) a successful tradition, I consider these performances as commenting upon New Zealand identity in a way that creates a different relationship with an audience to those solo performances I have been analysing. I have a sense that there are solo performances that are less inclined towards the exploration of national identity and, as a result, lose the community building ability that sets *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* apart as examples of a distinctive New Zealand theatre.

Let me take a step back to clarify this distinction. In the way they correspond with a search for national identity, the solo performances I have considered so far may be seen to follow in the tradition of the 'man alone' of New Zealand literature. In *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* a personal history beset with unease and uncertainty echoes a search for a national identity, striking, in a specific socio-historical period, a powerful chord with a local audience. In this chapter, I consider solo performances that *also* offer perspectives from outside mainstream formulations of New Zealand identity, but where the search for a national identity is not as discernible in the individual's exploration of the past. The solo performances examined in this chapter represent perspectives outside the established

notion of a white, middle class, heterosexual and male ‘kiwi identity’, yet they reflect identity in terms of movements or cultures with global dimensions: the feminist movement, gay culture and multiculturalism.

There are different ways of reading this distinction. For instance, following William Peterson’s line of argument in *Performing Aotearoa* (2007), solo performance is a signifier of New Zealand’s transition from monoculture to multicultural. This argument is in keeping with the post-colonial and feminist theory of Gilbert and Tompkins’ study of monodrama, pointing to the form as a representation of successful decolonisation. It is possible to see solo performance as representing New Zealand’s success in letting go of its colonial baggage because it no longer needs to search for a national identity – the idea of ‘nation’ may be considered archaic, a male project with roots in a colonialism that looks to repress different identities in search of a single, unitary identity. In this context, the ‘man alone’ going out into the wilderness in search of a sense of self is a colonial construct that is out of keeping with New Zealand’s current strides towards cultural pluralism. Indeed, Gilbert and Tompkins point to solo performance as being successful in representing the *fluidity* of identity in post-colonial multicultural societies, “redefin[ing] self and identity as the body metamorphoses into new, more varied personae” (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 233).

Gilbert and Tompkins elaborate on the idea of fluidity in an article for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. They consider four solo performances, mostly by women, each from different post-colonial cultures. They argue:

The fluidity of subject positions activated by the solo performer (especially when he/she transgresses ontological categories) disrupts conventional expectations of characterization which require the effacement of the actor’s “self” in the service of the role. In post-colonial monodrama, the distinction between actor and role is often foregrounded as the performer enacts multiple subjectivities which resonate against – and dialogize – others in the course of

the performance. This enables the colonized Other, on the one hand, to draw attention to the dominant tropes of representation to which she is subject, and on the other hand, to subvert the monologic tendency by emphasizing her hybrid identity which enables multiple subject positions to be played out – and played with. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1997, 8)

This suggests that by assuming different roles or presenting the different selves of the individual, the lone performer upsets colonial notions of self that attempt to fix identity according to the desires of the coloniser (usually, a straight, white male). Significantly, Gilbert and Tompkins' resistance to this kind of positioning results in feminine pronouns to describe the colonized subject of monodrama in general. This female subjectivity may be seen as a form of resistance in that *she* reflects identity as fluid and multiple in relation to the (male) colonial desire for a fixed and fully formed identity. An identity, they argue, whose perspective is commonly portrayed in conventional theatre.

Taking a cue from Gilbert and Tompkins' gender-specific description of contemporary solo performance, I want to distinguish between the female-oriented approach implied in their examination and the male-oriented approach of the 'man alone' tradition that I have been analysing. I am not proposing this distinction as a stable, clearly delineable binary. Indeed, rather than seeing male and female as essentialist terms of reference (*either male or female*), I am using such distinctions to signpost the *difference* in approach between solo performances – a difference suggested in the performances themselves – that disturb and, possibly, contradict any attempt to formulate Manichean opposites. Viewing the different approaches in this way offers alternative interpretations of the success of solo performance in New Zealand.

For instance, if one considers the male-oriented tradition that I have been exploring, it is possible that the success of these solo performances arises from the

way they may be seen to both represent and critique the maleness of New Zealand identity. The masculinist and puritan attitudes of the settlers that serve as the foundation to established notions of New Zealand's national identity are contradicted by traits that might be considered feminine. The act of theatrical expression on its own contradicts the idea of a laconic (male) kiwi identity at the same time that it involves the search for a national identity – theatre, in this sense, works against the deep-seated antagonism within a masculinist puritan settler society towards anything considered feminine, decadent or wasteful (such as art and theatre). This bears similarities to the anti-theatrical prejudice that Jonas Barish traces back to Plato's distaste for the mimetic – a danger, Plato argued, to a fully functioning and orderly society.<sup>1</sup>

If, as post-colonial theory suggests, the process of colonisation is also a process of feminising the native, these solo performances reveal that the coloniser as 'man alone' in the bush looking for a new hybrid identity is threatened in his masculinity at the same time that he needs to assert it. It is out of this dilemma that the possibility of asking (in the company of an audience) what it means to be a New Zealander leads to community building – ironically, it is the attack and possible destruction of an idea of New Zealand identity that leads to the creation of a new one.

Mason and Thompson are already playing multiple roles in a way that may be seen to fracture the masculinist ethos of New Zealand's national identity. What we have seen with *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* is that, unlike his 'man alone' counterpart, the 'actor alone' can take on different roles and identities pointing to such possibilities at a collective level. In the case of *Michael James Manaia*, the role played by Moriarty may be fixed to a single male character, however

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<sup>1</sup> See Barish (1981).

the disintegration of that character – an especially masculine individual – reveals the multiplicity of identities that war within the man alone on stage (readable as a symbolic representation of New Zealand’s bicultural identity). Thus, *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* reveal a tension within traditional (colonial) ideas of identity as male and fixed, the desire to seek out a new identity going beyond the singular to the hybrid and the multiple. That this tension is expressed in terms that are distinctly male – so that, like the tradition of the ‘man alone’ in New Zealand literature, the question of a male identity (what it means to be a man) becomes synonymous with a search for what it means to be a New Zealander – means that the idea of a fixed (male) kiwi identity is explicitly challenged and revealed to be unstable and uneasy (features evident in both the form and content of these solo performances).

This reading may also be seen to diverge from that of Patrick Evans in his article on cultural nationalism for *Landfall*: ‘Whipping Up a Local Culture: Masochism and the Cultural Nationalists’ (2005) – a precedent to his recent book *The Long Forgetting* (2007). While I would, like Evans, point to an ending of male-oriented nationalism (Evans suggests this was symbolically played out in the ‘rape’ of Mervyn Thompson in 1984), unlike Evans I see the ‘national’ as something to be rediscovered rather than left behind. Celebrating writer Annamarie Jagose’s attempt to create “a space in which New Zealanders can write beyond the cultural constructions that identify them nationally, or as ‘women’, ‘gay’, ‘Polynesian’, ‘working class’, or any of those dimensions that have for so long controlled our writing identities”, Evans argues that cultural nationalism “implies a single, unfolding purpose that is difficult to believe anymore” and a “structure of paths we now know the culture need no longer take” (Evans 2005, 149). However, I argue that, in the case

of New Zealand solo performance, not only has the theatre offered a variety of paths in the moment of performance by unsettling dominant notions of a (male) New Zealand identity, but that the disavowal of identity in the contemporary context in relation to larger ideas of national identity is more likely to confine than liberate.

Despite the fluidity that is suggested by the female-oriented approach of Peterson, Gilbert, Tompkins and Evans, losing the desire to discover a national identity – the product of supposed decolonisation – appears to result in the loss of potential power, politically and aesthetically, of solo performance as a theatrical expression of New Zealand identity. Ironically, the fluidity that is represented by solo performances that appeal to global ideas of identity point to a degree of rigidity in terms of identity – the performances I consider in this chapter may be seen to conform (to varying degrees) to established templates that are recognisable to a ‘global’ audience, thus losing specificity to New Zealand. I do not mean this to be a personal criticism of the particular artists that developed these solo performances; rather I see this as a product of the current dominant socio-economic forces – a sign of the times – that I recognise as affecting my own thinking and choices in theatre-making. It may be that the loss of an explicit colonial power (Britain) to fight against for a definition of self has led to a kind of vacuum – there is the sense that we are all, now, individuals in a free world. If there *is* something to fight against (perhaps the neo-colonialism of late capitalism that is driven especially by the United States) it is difficult to know how to fight something that is so insidiously interwoven into our everyday lives. In place of resistance there is nostalgia for a time when imperialism was being fought and identities wrought by a community in the process of forming.

However, I *also* see in the solo performances in this chapter (and in my own desire to explore theatre in New Zealand rather than pursue an identity overseas) a

sign that there may be different possibilities. Therefore, I analyse the solo performances in this chapter with a view to critiquing the notion of fluidity in contemporary culture and setting up possible alternatives. Before I consider some of the many solo performances that have appeared in New Zealand in the last two decades, I begin by considering an earlier solo performance, *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (1978), which establishes a different take on identity to the nation-building project of male-oriented tradition. I then look at a number of solo performances that represent the point of view of the Other in contemporary New Zealand: *A Long Undressing* (1995), *Krishnan's Dairy* (1998) and *Ka Shue/Letters Home* (1996). I also consider solo performance that represents nostalgia for the community building process – principally *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* (1997) – ending with a closer consideration of *Hatch or the Plight of Penguins* (2007), to discuss the possibility of returning to a theatre that takes part in the search for a national identity. Throughout I will be considering the following questions: in what way can the appeal to global movements and cultures – reflected in the escape of so many solo performers into a global touring culture – be seen as also typical for a New Zealand identity? Indeed, how might a ‘universal’ outlook (a perspective shared by the colonialist) already be affecting the representation of the local in New Zealand solo performance?

A solo performance that precedes both *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* and one that has been performed as much as, possibly more so than, *The End of the Golden Weather* is Cathy Downes’ *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (1978).<sup>2</sup> In many ways, this performance may be considered similar to those I have been analysing not only in terms of its astounding success but also in its representation of

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<sup>2</sup> There are, like Mason’s performance of *The End of the Golden Weather* different numbers ascribed to how often Downes has performed *The Case of Katherine Mansfield*. Downes states that she performed it approximately 1200 times (Downes pers. comm. 2007, December 31). In 2006, director Katie Wolfe and actor Danielle Cormack restaged the performance for seasons in Auckland and Wellington.

the life of a New Zealander. Downes, assuming the role of a literary icon, offers an insight into life in New Zealand that is, to a considerable extent, shaped by her difficulties of being a woman in a masculine culture. Early on in the performance, Downes-as-Mansfield says (quoting one of Mansfield's letters):

It is the hopelessly insipid doctrine that love is the only thing in the world, taught (hammered) into women from generation to generation, which hampers us so cruelly. We must get rid of that bogey. Then comes the opportunity of happiness and freedom. (Downes 1988, VHS recording).

However, while it is possible to read a female critique of New Zealand culture into the performance, in the circumstances in which it was produced and then became successful, not to mention the way the performance itself positions the audience, it is clear that New Zealand identity is considered a peripheral concern to the inner life of a female character. Instead, the success of *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* may be credited to the way it appeals to an international audience (including a New Zealand audience) with a recognizable international feminist icon from the first wave of feminism from the perspective of the second wave in the 1970s.

To explain my reasoning, let me describe the performance. In the performance, Downes appears on a stage that features a table, chair and other assorted props that convey the working environment of a writer. Her hair is shaped in the distinctive bob by which Mansfield was (and is) recognised, and she is dressed in the lacy frilled blouse and long skirts of Edwardian England. Throughout the performance, Downes represents a 'true-to-life' depiction of a participant in the philosophical and literary discussions of early 20th Century Europe. During the performance Downes talks to the audience as if they were confidantes to the private thoughts of the Mansfield persona that she portrays. Downes-as-Mansfield is regularly teary-eyed and distraught: of Mansfield's early life in New Zealand, of Mansfield's reaction to her younger brother's death in WW1, of a white hat that



symbolises Mansfield's erstwhile lover and husband, the writer John Middleton Murry. In the selections that Downes performs from the collected writings of Mansfield, what is represented is a woman consumed with a desire to break free of the social and cultural shackles that bind her life, first in New Zealand, and then as a writer in England. Throughout the performance there is a tension between joy and loss that seem to be the consequence of doing so.<sup>3</sup>

The international context, within which *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* may be seen, is reflected in the form. The structure of the performance takes on the editorial deliberations of a biography, as Downes based the performance on a selection of Mansfield's writings and used works written about Mansfield to flesh out the character. In this way, the performance reflects the kind of biographical solo performances that have grown in popularity in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In *Cast of One* (1989), John Gentile gives an account of the biographical solo performance through its many exponents that have gained notoriety in tours throughout the English-speaking world, suggesting that this is a form that allows performers to 'move' to different places and perform to a range of audiences (1989, 130). For example, well-known American actor Hal Holbrook represented Mark Twain in *Mark Twain Tonight!* (1966). Twain was also famous as a platform performer who presented his reflections of contemporary society and ideas as much as he recited from his literature. Perhaps more so than Emlyn Williams' imitation of Dickens, Holbrook focussed on representing an idea of Twain the man rather than replicating Twain in his lectures and readings. There is a wide array of solo performances focussing on the personality of the subject, and especially the private lives of literary figures. For example, Oscar Wilde in Michael MacLiammoir's

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<sup>3</sup> My observations of *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* are based on a recording of Downes performing at the National Library Theatre in Wellington in 1988.

*Importance of Being Oscar* (1961), John Aubrey in Roy Dotrice's performance *Brief Lives* (1967), George Bernard Shaw in Max Adrian's *By George* (1967), Gertrude Stein in Pat Carroll's *Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein* (1979), and Edmund Kean in Ben Kingsley's *Edmund Kean* (1983). These solo performances have been staged all over the world.

As well as allowing actors to move physically, the biographical solo performance allows the actor to move professionally. These solo performances are often referred to as 'vehicles' and as a showcase for actors, a way to get him or her places at various stages in a career. In particular, the biographical solo performance appears to be a popular choice for actors at either end of a career: it can be a successful way to kick-start a career as well as a way to celebrate the talents of the well-known actor. The actor is able to display his or her theatrical talent by recreating a well-known figure, using the audience's knowledge of such figures to create interest in his or her performance. The performer's skill in re-presenting the well-known literary figure would appear to create a display of virtuosity that brings pleasure to performer and audience alike.

*The Case of Katherine Mansfield* was tailored to get Downes' career underway, which makes the parallels between Mansfield the writer and Downes the actor quite striking. Downes, who had recently graduated from the New Zealand Drama School when she came to devise the performance, was in Holland at the time pursuing a career as an actor. In this way, Downes emulates the experience of her subject, who moved from New Zealand to England in 1908; Mansfield travelled to England ostensibly to train as a musician, and then went on to pursue a literary career. Downes performed *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* in Holland, Great Britain, the United States and Australia and New Zealand. This differs from the trend I have been

considering: Mason and Thompson returned from Europe to create a New Zealand theatre, eventually turning to solo performance as a last resort. *Michael James Manaia*, written after several other experiments in Theatre Marae, also toured New Zealand before and after a tour to Edinburgh. The focus of that performance, as with *The End of the Golden Weather* and *Coaltown Blues* was on exploring definitions of a New Zealand bicultural identity.

In portraying an international feminist icon, Downes has a ready-made international audience and it is in this context, rather than a specifically New Zealand one, that the success of the performance can be understood. Downes suggests that there is little difference between New Zealand audiences and international audiences because “many people internationally have some knowledge of Katherine Mansfield” but that such knowledge is not essential because a local and international audience will also respond to the “universal themes” represented in performance (pers. comm. 2007, December 31). *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* has of course been successful in New Zealand as well, and this may also reflect the appreciation of a local audience for one of their own that has made it on the international stage – responding to the sense of New Zealand as being isolated by pointing to someone who has put New Zealand on the map. Yet, primarily, it seems that this performance was made for travelling in an international context and may be seen as a forerunner to many of the recent solo performances in New Zealand, travelling to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and other festivals around the world.

Downes’ representation of Mansfield suggests that a local New Zealand identity is a peripheral concern. Her selections from Mansfield’s writings points to a focus on larger themes of life, death and love that also reflect the concerns of Mansfield’s contemporaries in Europe. In performance, Downes focuses on the

psychology of the character, a common trend for an actor when playing a well-known figure in a biographical solo performance. Gentile suggests that biographical solo performances tend to weave together segments of literature by the writers themselves, alongside excerpts from biographies written about them, to set the audience up as confidantes to whom is revealed the “essence of the historical figure” (Gentile 1989, 147). Often in these kinds of solo performance, the audience is situated behind the fourth wall and the solo performer speaks as if she is talking to somebody off stage. At other times, the audience is positioned as guests or friends to whom the historical figure reveals psychological truths that say something about the subject and the times in which she lives. This is the kind of relationship that Downes creates, pointing to the innermost fears and desires that she interprets from Mansfield’s writings.

It may be that through playing this role, Downes – especially through a naturalistic method – comes to represent her own experience. In this way, it might be possible that the isolation and fear that Downes points to in Mansfield’s life as a form of ‘ailment’ – mental, spiritual and, eventually, physical – can be related to being female and from New Zealand. That is, the subtext to Mansfield’s angst as represented by Downes may be read as locally prescribed and, possibly, relating to the female experience of the pioneer and settler culture of New Zealand. To relate to Mansfield, Downes may have used her experience as a female actor from New Zealand pursuing a career in Europe – moving from a conformist and masculinist New Zealand to find a female or feminist sense of self in Europe. Janet Frame is writer who followed a similar path, moving from a New Zealand culture that had looked to institutionalise her to a sense of the freedom and diversity of Europe. Europe, it seems, is a place that allows for the assuming of different roles compared to the (male-oriented) monoculture of New Zealand.

It is possible to see Downes using the story of Katherine Mansfield's life (part of which is set in New Zealand) to represent a broader notion of female repression with an international audience. Early on in the performance, Downes portrays a young Mansfield trapped in New Zealand:

Here in my room, I feel as though I was in London. (Begins to write) "In London..." (begins to sob). Oh, to write the word makes me feel that I could burst into tears. Isn't it terrible to love anything so much? I do not care for men but London it is life. I am longing to consort with my superiors. (Downes 1988 VHS recording).

Assuming the role of Mansfield, Downes shows a trend for women in New Zealand to escape the confines of a conformist masculinist culture such as New Zealand for the multiplicity of a place such as Europe. The greater sense of a fluid identity comes through in the performance: a girl in New Zealand, a young woman in Europe, writer, lover and wife. At the same time, it seems that Downes is moved by the different kinds of isolation that she perceives in the Mansfield persona. If the young girl in New Zealand feels a colonial sense of isolation from the life of London, Downes' representation of the older Mansfield points to a woman who feels the isolation of a New Zealander in Europe without a sense of place or community. This seems to be an ongoing theme of the many New Zealanders that have travelled to Europe and returned to New Zealand in search of sense of place and identity. Downes, for example, returned to New Zealand with her solo performance but has continued to tour with it intermittently to places outside New Zealand. At the same time, she has become a prominent theatre actor and director in New Zealand.

It is, then, possible to see in *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* many of the themes that I have been exploring throughout this thesis. There is the representation of repression, isolation, and the desire to break free of a conformity that denies the right to create an individual identity. However, whereas the success of *The End of the*

*Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues*, and *Michael James Manaia* may be attributed to the way these themes emanate from personal reflections that correspond with a wider search for national identity (at times when this seems particularly fraught), the success of *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* rests in the way it appeals to a wider global audience with the careful portrait of an international feminist icon. Reflecting the professionalism of an actor from New Zealand working in a country other than New Zealand, the performance delves into the many facets of an internationally renowned female writer. Downes is not looking to seek out or discover the writer within a specific national context; rather she looks to represent something that is familiar in that it is 'universal'.

As a director, Downes helped bring the solo performance *A Long Undressing* (1995) to the New Zealand stage. This is an autobiographical solo performance produced by dancer and choreographer Michael Parmenter. Downes' involvement seems to have come later in the process, after Parmenter had written the text and choreographed the dances that are interspersed throughout the monologue. If Downes' solo performance may be considered within the international context of feminism, this solo performance might be considered in relation to a gay culture, which is also international in its influence. As with Downes and the feminist movement, Parmenter may not have aimed for *A Long Undressing* to be a direct reflection of this culture; however, as I shall explain, his performance does bear a resemblance to performance styles that are associated with this internationalized culture and therefore affect the reading or understanding of the performance.

In *A Long Undressing*, Parmenter speaks directly to the audience, recollecting experiences from his life. Parmenter is dressed at the beginning in a suit; a chair and a glass of water are his only set/props/aids. He repeatedly returns to the theme of

instability and uncertainty. He introduces these themes in his first appearance on stage, moving to a piece of music composed by David Downes called 'Dancing on the Fault Line'. The music, disturbing and disharmonious, is mirrored in the jerky, overbalancing choreography of Parmenter. When he comes to speak to the audience he explains that the dance reflects an early experience of an earthquake. Parmenter tells the audience that from this moment on unease and uncertainty have been the norm in his life – his identity is unsettled. He describes his life in terms of movement: shaky, awkward and, sometimes, graceful.

This is evident in the events that he recalls. He recollects growing up in a fundamentalist Christian family in Southland, and feeling alienated when he discovers a sexual attraction for men that makes his sexuality other to what he is told is acceptable in New Zealand. He describes a dancing career that takes him from New Zealand to New York and Japan, and back to New Zealand. While it seems that he comes to master adversity by embracing it, it is clearly his diagnosis with HIV that unsettles Parmenter's life in the present and hangs over the performance. At the time, this was to be Parmenter's farewell performance. The title of the performance refers to a literal and symbolic undressing as Parmenter attempts to strip back the layers of his life to reveal essential truths about it.

In some ways, *A Long Undressing* might be compared to Mason and Thompson's autobiographical solo performances. Parmenter's performance is especially similar to Thompson's performance in *Passing Through* in that the audience's knowledge of the performer's ill health and their witnessing of reflections of a man who considers death close, add another layer of immediacy and urgency to the performance. In both, there is an attempt to sift through their lives as a way of coming to some sort of understanding about who and where they are. Yet with

Thompson (and Mason), this identity and sense of place is related to exploring a particularly New Zealand experience – a search for identity in relation to that place. As I shall explain, in *A Long Undressing* the concern seems directed towards uncovering truths that are broader, supposedly ‘universal’ and, therefore, less tied to a specific national context.

To discuss the representation of identity in *A Long Undressing*, it is useful to consider a style of solo performance that has been referred to as ‘autoperformance’. In the article “Dialogic Monologue: A Dialogue” (1994), Jennifer Harvie and Richard Paul Knowles consider the autobiographical solo performance in the Canadian context, where it has been a particularly popular style.<sup>4</sup> Harvie and Knowles use the term ‘autoperformance’ to describe a solo performer who takes the stage as his or herself and re-presents recollections and observations from his/her experiences. Harvie and Knowles suggest that in the autobiographical solo performance the idea of identity as something fluid and moving (unfixed) may be enhanced by the self-conscious re-presentation of his or her identity on stage. The performance of self on stage challenges the notion of an unchanging, authentic self. That is, the audience comes to see identity as *theatrical*, the solo performer pointing to the ironies involved in re-presenting his or herself, or different aspects of him or herself, in relation to an audience – suggesting this as a reflection of everyday life. It seems this self-reflexive re-presentation of self is a way of becoming ‘naked’ before an audience, of revealing the truth of self or, at least, using performance as a way to discover the truthfulness of identity as something performed in everyday life. It is possible that this kind of performance is driven by the desire to seek out a sense of community in a post-

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<sup>4</sup> Harvie and Knowles’ article is also the starting point to Gilbert and Tompkins *Performing Hybridity in Post-Colonial Monodrama* (1996). For other discussions on the autobiographical solo performance see Gentile (1989), Peterson (1997).



modern, post-industrial society – a way of ‘disarming’ the audience with personal insights that allow them to do the same.

In this regard, and in relation to Parmenter’s performance in particular, it is also useful to consider a distinctive solo form, which arose in the United States in the 1980s in response to the AIDS epidemic. David Román discusses these solo performances in *Acts of Intervention* (1998), a book that explores the theatrical aspects within the AIDS movement especially as performed by the gay community. He devotes a chapter to solo performances that have attempted to challenge the concealment of homosexuality and AIDS. Román suggests that the effect of the disease on the gay community is especially evident in the adaptation of monologues by gay performers, a style of performance that was popularised in the United States by performers such as Tim Miller (Román 1998, 142). Like the feminist monologue, this kind of solo performance is a form of political resistance, and, specifically, an attempt to resist cultural rejection and denial of sexualities other to the heterosexual orthodoxy.

It also seems to be a way of community building. That the effect of the AIDS epidemic has been especially devastating within the gay male community is attributed to the ‘unspokenness’ – the enforced silence – of homosexuality. This is a recurring theme within the solo performances about living with AIDS. This kind of solo performance uses the personal experience of the performer as a way of making visible (and being able to talk about) the root causes of the AIDS epidemic as both cultural and biological. While these solo performances attempt to make visible the plight of those with AIDS, Román suggests that this kind of performance attempts to challenge the conflation of homosexuality with AIDS:

In solo performance, the reflexive model of identification has historically been the primary choice for performers and playwrights... Several solo performers

and playwrights, however, have introduced other means of identification, exploiting the unique capability of solo performance and one-person plays to manipulate identification with the representation constructed by the gay male performer alone on the stage. These out gay performers, already marked by their homosexual bodies, challenge the dominant AIDS ideologies of their specific historical, cultural moment and the ways that AIDS is understood by their intended audience. (Román 1998, 127)

This suggests that solo performance is a way for the gay performer to overcome a sense of isolation by allowing the audience to empathise with his situation. At the same time, Román argues that solo performers who focus on AIDS work between the perils of universalising the AIDS experience to the point of stereotype, and individualising AIDS in a way that it is written off as idiosyncratic and without social relevance.

Of Miller, in particular, and his performance *Sex/Love/Stories* (1990) Román suggests a balance between the two:

The work is primarily autobiographical, but the effect is directed against an over-identification with the performer and focused instead on prompting spectators to tell their own stories and participating in direct actions to fight AIDS. Two moments in the performance exemplify this process. The first segment concerns a literally “stripped down” interrogation of gay male sexuality in the midst of AIDS, while the second offers a utopian possibility emerging from such a necessary, radical self-critique of the body... [H]e returns from the wanderings of urban sexual explorations to the most local of all geographies, that of the naked body. (1998, 142)

In solo performance Miller attempts to move between the individual and the social, from his aloneness on stage to the grouping of the audience – a literal and metaphorical building of community. In *My Queer Body* (1992) for instance, Miller steps out into the audience, naked, and sits on the lap of an audience member. He asks the spectator to “feel my heart” (1992, VHS recording). In this way, the lone performer as a representation of the isolation that comes with being homosexual in a heterosexual society is (literally and symbolically) addressed and, possibly, overcome – the performer comes directly into contact with his audience. Miller argues that this

project of community-building is vital in a culture where such groupings are actively dissuaded and individuals isolated as a result. Miller uses this argument to counter the dismissal of such performances as “preaching to the converted” – a claim made by the conservative right as well as members of the gay community.<sup>5</sup>

Parmenter’s solo performance bears a considerable resemblance to those of Miller, especially in the revealing of personal experience alongside the revealing of the body. However, in an interview I conducted with Parmenter he rejected too close an association with this kind of performance, even though he agreed that the audience might recognise similarities and make the comparison (Parmenter 2006, October 10). Parmenter says that although he was aware of these solo monologues (and became aware of Miller only after he had created *A Long Undressing*), he was not trying to replicate this kind of performance; rather he views *A Long Undressing* as a series of arias. His resistance to seeing *A Long Undressing* alongside such performances comes through in performance when Parmenter directly dismisses the idea that a dance piece he is about to do be seen as elegiac. In the contemporary dance culture, the elegy that looks to lament the passing of those with AIDS – to bear witness to the names of those that have died – has become quite common. Parmenter suggests as much in performance, telling the audience that he also has created this kind of performance in addition to those created by many others. He refers to that particular dance as an alternative – as a form of “supplication” and “a prayer to the dead and the living” (*A Long Undressing* 1997, DVD recording).

It may be that Parmenter’s rejection of such an association also reflects his wish to engage with a wider audience than an elegy or monologue about AIDS may afford. With Miller, the performance is for a mostly gay audience, recounting

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<sup>5</sup> See Miller and Román (1995).

experiences with which that particular audience might empathise. Parmenter, on the other hand, recounts his experience growing up gay in New Zealand offering a point of view that is rarely heard in a traditionally masculine and homophobic culture. In this way, there is the potential for Parmenter to critique New Zealand identity from the point of view of someone who has grown up as sexually other to what is considered the norm. In this way, the performance might be similar to the way New Zealand identity comes to be troubled in *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia*.

As in Downes' performance however, in *A Long Undressing* Parmenter's concern with New Zealand identity is peripheral to the personal aspect of the performance. While it is possible to read such concerns into the performance, Parmenter's focus is more the underlying truths that he can mine from his individual experience than it is the search for a sense of national identity. He represents an identity that is seemingly fluid, gliding between the various experiences of his life in a way that suggests a kind of seamlessness. This is reflected in the content, which includes an unceasing awareness of the virus that circulates through his body without stopping.

This creates a contradiction. The way in which Parmenter comes to re-present his 'self' suggests an identity that has been settled. It seems that he has come to a resolution about his life and his place in the world. This is emphasized by the way he changes between dancing – when he is present in his movement – and when he stops to speak to the audience. The way he speaks suggests that his identity has been resolved in the past: the rhetoric nature of his speech suggests that questions about identity have been resolved. This may reflect the idea of the performance as a kind of retrospective where identity, personally and collectively, is considered in the past, and

no longer in need of examination or discovery. In this way, Parmenter seems to represent an identity that is fixed. At the same time, he muses in his eloquent monologue about the revelations and innovations that come when he acknowledges the fluidity and motion of the earth, and of his identity upon it.

This sense of resolution may also reflect global ideas of identity. It is possible to see this in the resolution to *A Long Undressing*, as Parmenter recalls another experience relating to an earthquake. This time the ‘earthquake’ is in Mexico, where he participates in a ritualistic dance that celebrates the quakes caused by the meeting of the Pacific and Atlantic plates:

For much of my life, having been denied whakapapa and progeny, I have insisted on my own self-sufficiency, maintained my need to stand alone. Now I find I need to be present at this dance, I gain courage in the knowledge that this fractured earth is trodden by feet other than my own. What connects me to these people what connects us all is the body that confronts its own mortality, the community of the flesh open to death. The dance along the fault line. (*A Long Undressing* 1997, DVD recording)

Parmenter’s comments suggest that he has settled upon an identity that is perhaps universal – the human race. Parmenter’s reflections seem to point to an identity that is no longer to be searched for in a national or local context but in a larger global context.

Consider this notion of a fluid, global identity in relation to the solo tradition at Toi Whakaari (the New Zealand Drama School). Commencing in 1989, this final year assignment requires students to create a solo performance that allows them to fit their props into the boot of a car. The solo performance must be based on a New Zealander or Pacific personality that inspires the student. Downes created *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* after leaving the school and well before the assignment was first implemented. However, her experience may be seen as a precedent in that the solo form has become a way for Toi Whakaari students to establish a career, a way for

them to showcase their skills for agents, directors and other talent scouts – members of the industry are invited to the final performances at the school. Such is the success of the Toi Whakaari solos that the whole enterprise has become an event in its own right, with a widely publicised season every year in hometown Wellington and, recently, a touring season in Auckland. Out of this assignment, extended works have been developed (sometimes years after their initial creation), including: *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* (1997), *Krishnan's Dairy* (1998), *Wilding* (2002), *Knot a Problem* (2003), and *The Wholly Grain* (2004).

The success of the Toi Whakaari solos lies in the way it has equipped students for the commercial realities of being an actor, teaching them to be self-sufficient while giving them a practical means of employing his/her skills. That is, a solo performance allows young actors to move both physically and professionally, asking them to consider their local culture, and possibly their own experience as fodder for a theatrical performance that can be toured locally and, possibly, internationally. A prominent example is *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello*, one of the first and most well known of the Toi Whakaari solos. Written and performed by Tim Balme, the performance was conceived in 1989 and, with the help of fellow Toi Whakaari graduate Simon Bennett as director, was revived and enlarged in 1997. The performance had a successful tour of New Zealand and went on to the Edinburgh Festival where Balme picked up an acting award. The performance is based on George Wilder, a small time criminal who became notorious in 1960s New Zealand for a series of prison escape, and his ability to evade his captors for long periods at a time.<sup>6</sup> The performance begins with a radio recording of people discussing their experience of meeting Costello. The distance between man and myth suggested in

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<sup>6</sup> The performance is based on a written biography of Wilder as well as research conducted by Balme, but the name of the title character was changed to Jimmy Costello because Wilder refused to give his blessing to a biographical performance (interview with author, 15 November 2006).

these accounts is explored through a retelling of the events that, for a small time, made Wilder a national folk hero. Throughout the performance, Balme rarely changes costume, assuming, for most of the time, black singlet and pants and using a specially designed chair to illustrate different scenes and events in the narrative.

In many ways, the form and content of *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* offers another ‘man alone’ travelling the country, searching for an identity, and offering a local audience a collective sense of self through the representation of a shared past. At one point in the narrative, Balme-as-Costello refers to the popular notion of himself as the knowledgeable ‘man alone’ in the bush as the wishful thinking of a bored New Zealand society more than it is the reality of man making it up as he goes along. In part, this attempt to seek out the truth of the past may explain its popularity when it was toured through New Zealand in 1997, the celebration of local history proving entertaining and playing up to the inherent sense of outsidersness that accompanies a post-colonial culture. Balme himself points to the potential of the solo form to create a sense of community:

The thing about a solo show is that because you’ve spent maybe two hours with these people that night in some ways they have a greater sense of ownership of you. They feel they know you that much better, much more than they might if they’re watching a fourth wall thing, and maybe that gives them a greater confidence (or a permission) to approach you afterwards and want to, as I say, share their stories, which is great, you know – that’s what theatre is about to me. (Interview with the author, 15 November 2006)

This kind of intimacy is something that a number of solo performers speak of, referring to the potential of this form of theatre to reach an audience. In doing so, it may well be that *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* reveals truths about conformity and repression that lie at the heart of New Zealand culture, both within the country and in the culture’s relationship to the rest of the world.

In some respects, the sense of nostalgia and the presentation of the ‘outsider’ in *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* bear similarities with *The End of the Golden Weather*. The difference, possibly, begins with the relationship between actor and role in relation to the audience. It is not like Mason or Thompson who essentially play themselves, or a sense of themselves as ‘objective’ observer looking into the past in an attempt to explain some form of uncertainty or discomfort in the present, and that this uncertainty is revealed – through the recalling of personal experience – to be of social origin. Rather, it is closer to Moriarty’s performance of a central character who may ‘ape’ people from his past in a way that reveals more about the central character than those he portrays. Here again, though, there is a difference in that Balme does not mimic other characters as Costello so much as he takes on the different roles as separate characters, their versions of the story offering different insight into the make-up and actions of the main protagonist. This is different to Moriarty’s relationship to the role where the personal connection to the action and context – the drive to speak to the audience about a problem with which he is closely associated – is closer to Mason and Thompson’s exploration of the past. In *Michael James Manaia*, the performer’s relationship to the subject(s) he represents, and the audience’s knowledge of this relationship creates a particular sense of urgency and immediacy. Balme’s role-play in *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* reflects the kind of multi-character solo performances to which Gilbert and Tompkins refer and, in the case of *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello*, creates a relationship between performer, role and the past that is not as personal as *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia*.

Evolving as it does from an assignment that aims to develop the professional abilities of the performer, *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* reflects a focus on the actor’s



assumption of multiple roles – a way of displaying his abilities as an actor. When I saw *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* in 1998, I remember enjoying the display of virtuosity as Balme changed roles. The transitions were seamless. The changes in role came in quick succession, as he moved between an assortment of characters: “the bullshiter, the bushman’s philosopher, the rogue and rookie, the honest cop, the stupid cop”.<sup>7</sup> I also enjoyed seeing familiar (from movies) characters transported into a local setting. At the beginning of the performance, Balme appeared in a long coat with hat and pistol, striking an image reminiscent of the film noir cops-and-robbers caper. Many of the scenes during the performance called to mind a small Midwestern town in America in the rock’n’roll era of the 1950s. Again my enjoyment of these similarities may be seen to reflect an overcoming of isolation as a sense of distance was being closed between New Zealand the rest the world – that New Zealand was, or could be, much like anywhere else, and the United States in particular.

Balme’s assuming of familiar roles in *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* as a way of coming closer to a model from elsewhere (America), suggests less interest in exploring the strangeness of New Zealand history/identity. As with *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* and *A Long Undressing* the consideration of New Zealand identity may be read into the performance but a search for local identity does not seem to be as seriously pursued as in *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia*. Balme’s re-consideration of New Zealand through a familiar genre seems different to the way the ‘Back-in-Nam’ genre of *Michael James Manaia* is subverted to challenge New Zealand identity. The success of *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* may be attributed to the way it aligns itself with a familiar genre to

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<sup>7</sup> This list of characters is featured on a website promoting international tours and featuring *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello*: <http://www.theatretoursinternational.com/PastShows/PSInternational/PSJC.htm>

emphasize 'kiwi identity' as interesting, exciting even, against the usual staid images of a grey and conformist provincialism.

In many ways, a solo performance like *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* may be seen to reflect the overpowering influence of television on contemporary (global) culture. While television and film are not, strictly speaking, models for such performances, the slick (fluid) changes between scenes, and the suturing of music, lighting and action, all speak of this influence; watching the rapid changes of characters in these multiple-role solo performances is almost like changing channels on a television. The characters, and the setting they are played within, also seem to be familiar from television and film. The influence of these media in a number of these multiple-character solo performances is perhaps unsurprising considering that film and television tend to be a way for an actor to make a living, and the multiple-character solo performance is, therefore, a useful way for an actor to showcase skills for further employment.

That the multiple-character solo seems to be the kind of solo performance most often employed by young actors is testament to its marketability. It makes sense from a marketing perspective that you show the range and versatility of the performer. The multiple-character solo that is popular with students at Toi Whakaari, as well as elsewhere, seems to have settled into a familiar form that mimics, and stands in for, a larger idea of theatre not so removed from film and television. An example of this close relationship seems to be evident in Toa Fraser's *No.2*, an extraordinary popular solo performance thanks in large part to the charisma of actor Madeline Sami. In the original production, Sami performs a diverse range of roles around the central protagonist: a Fijian Matriarch organising her successor. The success of that solo performance has recently resulted in a popular film of the same name that is directed

by Fraser with a large cast of characters. Both versions of *No. 2* suggest a quest for identity that is individual but not, as it has been in the past, focussed on the search for a collective New Zealand identity from a Fijian immigrants point of view.

In a strange way, this ‘theatre in miniature’ – institutionalised by New Zealand’s most established drama school – may realise the national theatre envisioned by the likes of Mason and Thompson. Solo performance has become the most popular and visible means of recording and giving voice to a multiplicity of New Zealand experiences. The multi-character solo performance as well as forms such as the biographical solo performance have allowed for the representation of a diverse range of historical figures. This has included George Wilder, tennis star Anthony Wilding (*Wilding*), and mathematician Vaughn Jones (*Knot a Problem*). These performances may be seen to display a sense of ‘history’, especially for the Pakeha audience that dominates the theatre-going public in New Zealand. The sense of nostalgia that is evident in solo performances such as *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello* suggests that a collective New Zealand identity has been settled in the present. Reflecting wider globalized cultures, it seems that identities can be assumed like masks for different circumstances and just as easily dropped when those circumstances become unfavourable or a more appealing mask presents itself.

Then again, it is possible to see in the representation of ‘world famous’ New Zealanders the ongoing effects of post-colonial isolation. *Wilding*, in particular, was lauded after Matt Chamberlain performed it before Queen Elizabeth at Wimbledon. This was the site where Anthony Wilding won eight titles in the 1920s, bringing international visibility to a small colony in the South Pacific. In a way that is not so dissimilar, Chamberlain’s return to Wimbledon, which gained the performance a great deal of notoriety, may be seen to reflect a culture that continues to look for a

collective feeling of relevance, visibility and presence from others. These stories may appeal to a need for a sense of history, the sense of a past, particularly, it would seem, if the story comes to be imagined as part of a recognisable generic formula that speaks of familiarity and sameness with cultures considered 'grown-up'. Essentially, the project appears to be one of aligning New Zealand's marginal identity as a set of remote Pacific Islands with the distant Western mainland (Europe/US), appealing to a New Zealand population that no longer sees any need to be looking for a national identity.

Identity is, to use a popular phrase, *not a problem*. As with the former colonial settlers, it seems that the way of coming to terms with a sense of isolation continues to be pursued by following models and ideas from overseas. These kinds of solo performances suggest that a New Zealand identity has been settled and now the job is to market local identity elsewhere and to a New Zealand audience that is getting used to thinking in global terms. When Mason went out in search of an audience, he was an amateur frustrated with the lack of a New Zealand theatre, which he considered a reflection of a unestablished national and cultural identity. Whereas Downes left the newly established New Zealand Drama School for Europe to establish a career just as a professional era in New Zealand was emerging, Balme represents a generation in which this professionalism appears to have come to fruition. *Toi Whakaari* reflects the notion that New Zealand culture has come of age from a bi-cultural nation to a multi-cultural one with a range of performers from different ethnic backgrounds representing their stories through the solo form.

Such a shift is most notable in the 'Others' that use solo performance to represent the experience of those outside the usual Pakeha/Maori formulations of national identity. These solo performances are considered an enormous success story

in New Zealand, reflecting a ‘coming of age’ as a multi-cultural society. In her article “Brave ‘New World’: Asian Voices in the Theatre of Aotearoa” (2005), Lisa Warrington refers to a number of solo performances in support of her claim that Asian theatre has recently gained a face and voice in New Zealand culture. This, she says, is a change from the historical representation of Asian Others in the work of Pakeha playwrights such as Vincent O’Sullivan (*Shurikan*, 1985) and Anthony McCarten (*Filth – Failed in London Try Hong Kong*, 1995). Warrington points to the Toi Whakaari solo assignment as producing a number of “firsts”, referring to performers other than Pakeha and Maori who have attended Toi Whakaari and adapted their solo assignments based on ‘growing up Other in New Zealand (Warrington 2006, 113). Warrington says this positions Toi Whakaari as offering alternative experiences and varied voices that make up New Zealand’s history – Chinese, for example, were one of the first immigrant groups to come to New Zealand but have long been ignored in official histories – and increasing recognition of a multicultural constituency. Perhaps this kind of recognition may be part of a broader cultural shift towards seeing New Zealand’s geographical position within the Pacific, closer to Asia than the European continent that has long resided in favoured constructions of national identity. On the other hand, it may also mean that the diverse identities to be found and performed in New Zealand have come to generalize the New Zealand/Kiwi identity, making it much like anywhere else in the Western world.

Let me consider this in relation to two performances that may be seen to represent the experiences of a multicultural New Zealand: *Krishnan’s Dairy* and *Ka Shue/Letters Home*. *Krishnan’s Dairy* is a much-celebrated piece of New Zealand theatre. Conceived at Toi Whakaari in 1994 by actor Jacob Rajan, the performance uses masks to tell the story of an Indian husband and wife who are owner/operators of

a dairy in New Zealand. In the same year that Balme took to the road with *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello*, Rajan collaborated with producer/director Justin Lewis and extended the performance of *Krishnan's Dairy* for a tour around New Zealand. This eventually led, as with Balme, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and an award. Since then, *Krishnan's Dairy* has been performed over three hundred times all over New Zealand and been invited to international art festivals. It has kept Rajan and Lewis financially afloat for the better part of a decade, while they have pursued other performances under the moniker Indian Ink Theatre Company. They have created a repertoire that includes two other performances (not solo performances): *The Candlestickmaker* and *The Pickle King*. The three performances form a trilogy, each performance incorporating more performers, technicians and producers than the last. In a conversation with a former producer for Indian Ink, I was told that the company had attempted to get one or all of the plays on the West End, and were considering franchising *Krishnan's Dairy*, so that Rajan and Lewis could focus on other projects, while, at the same time, receiving an income from the performance that has been their most popular creation.

Perhaps the main reason for the success of *Krishnan's Dairy* is the use of mask. Rajan appears at the beginning of the performance without a mask, singing a song with the accompaniment of a guitar that introduces the characters and their story. He then enacts the rest of the story with masks, distinguishing between the main characters, Gobi and Zina. Later, he introduces a layer of mythology to the story by representing the tale of Shah Jahan building the Taj Mahal for his lover Mumtaz Mahal. Masks also distinguish these characters. Apart from the moments when Rajan-as-Shah Jahan talks to the audience, the performance takes place as if behind a fourth wall, the characters Rajan represents talking as if to each other, themselves or to

customers that are coming into the store. While the performance features elements of Indian culture and myth, Rajan and Lewis are very clear that the use of mask calls upon the tradition of commedia dell' arte (Rajan and Lewis 2005, DVD recording).

Part of the enjoyment of commedia dell' arte comes from the familiarity of the characters and their stories. Audiences enjoy the possibility of seeing well-known tales, albeit in different circumstances, played by different actors; it makes for a fascinating mix of the familiar and new. These stories, and the characters they portray, may be seen as the precursor to modern comedy as filmmakers have exploited the popularity of the form through figures such as Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and may be seen as a precedent to the contemporary sitcom (Gordon 1983, 3). Such influence may also be seen to then re-effect theatre in Western countries such as New Zealand. In *The Ballad of Jimmy Costello*, for instance, Balme parades the different characters like a series of 'naturalistic' masks to delineate separate, yet familiar types.

Rajan's use of mask offers a theatrical medium rarely seen in mainstream New Zealand theatre. What is more, the use of mask in solo performance could potentially be a comment upon the construction of identity in the theatre (as a reflection of contemporary society), especially as Rajan's changing of masks in front of an audience contravenes the protocols of traditional commedia work in which the donning of and taking off of the mask is to be hidden from the audience. The explicit showing of the mask going on and off could possibly be used to prompt a conversation between actor and mask regarding the construction of identity in New Zealand. That is, mask might be used to foreground the constructedness of identity in the way that Gilbert and Tompkins discuss, with a performer of Indian heritage

provoking a dialogue with the audience about the experience of living in New Zealand – about who they are together.

Again, this can be read into the performance, especially as the characters on occasions come to refer to their mistreatment in New Zealand. Warrington, for instance, points to a moment in the performance when Rajan-as-Gobi, shortly after chasing thieves down the street, laments:

Why us? Why not countdown or Big Fresh or New World? New World – that's what I thought this country would be. That's why I brought you and Apu here. I thought we could work hard. Apu would get a good education. Then when we'd saved enough, we could go back to India and live like a King and Queen. But today, I was down the street like a fool chasing six hours of my life, and six hours of my life turned around and insulted me before it disappeared forever. This is the new world I brought you to. (Rajan and Lewis 2005, DVD recording)

This is the most overtly critical moment in the performance in terms of the Indian migrant experience in New Zealand, although there are moments throughout the performance that speak to this experience and its difficulties. Warrington picks up on such moments throughout the trilogy of *Indian Ink Company*, and suggests they illustrate the work as “exploring the interface between two cultures from the outsider's viewpoint, foregrounding the notion of ‘otherness’, of not quite being at ease in one world or another” (Warrington 2005, 105). This idea seems in keeping with the notion of liminality as I have been discussing it throughout the thesis: of New Zealand identity being found on the margins where hybridity and ambiguity lay the ground for the possibility of a distinctive identity to be discovered.

Yet in *Krishnan's Dairy* these moments seem to be a general reflection of a global experience of the Indian migrant more than one that is particular to New Zealand. That is, the kind of global migration that has seen many leave the Indian subcontinent to become the proprietors of dairies all over the Western world is a phenomenon that *Krishnan's Dairy* depicts without specific reference to time or



place. Rajan, himself, distances the notion that the performance is politically grounded in New Zealand, or even as coming from his experience of being Indian, given that his knowledge of India and Indian culture is confined to school classes in New Zealand where he was raised after immigrating from his birthplace – Malaysia (Warrington 2005, 110). Although Rajan’s identity reflects the notion of in-betweenness to which Warrington refers – he is not-quite-Indian, not quite-Malay, not-quite-New Zealander, but not-quite-not any of these things either – Rajan and Lewis are insistent that their intention is not about “being Indian in New Zealand” (Rajan 2005, 15) but to tell a good (human) story by weaving together the biggest clichés of Indianess: the corner dairy and the Taj Mahal (Rajan and Lewis 2005, DVD recording).

Ironically, the identity that Rajan represents in *Krishnan’s Dairy* is far simpler, established, and understandable to the audience, than the identity suggested by his own hybrid background. In many ways, the lightning quick and seamless way in which Rajan changes masks in performance comments, unintentionally, upon the kind of fluidity with which identities are assumed (and dropped) in a global context. What this perhaps points to is the problematic of such fluidity as the seamlessness hides rather than reveals the constructedness of identity – it hides the gap between the wearer and mask. Tessa Laird’s review of *Krishnan’s Dairy* suggests that this kind of generalizing comes with its own set of problems. Laird criticizes the performance for playing up to the prejudices of a white, middle class audience’s condescending view of the Indian Other as a sweet, quaint third world servant:

But one thing that was hard to stomach was, well, the stereotyping. I guess a little cliché-leaning is inevitable in a portrayal of the generic Indian-as-Dairy-Owner, but even Apu of *The Simpsons* gets to break out of the monotonous-dichotomous materialist vs spiritualist bind from time to time. And although admittedly the medium of the cartoon allows for the imaginary to be let loose,

isn't that also what the theatre is meant to be for? (Laird 1998, online reference)

Laird's observations offer a counterpoint to the overwhelming acclaim that has followed *Krishnan's Dairy*. As she sees it, the representation of Indianness (a 'mask' of Indianness) seems to appeal to an audience that is used to having their definitions passed down to them by popular culture – Kipling's *Kim*, Peter Sellers' generic Indian or Apu from *The Simpsons* (Apu is also the name of the son in *Krishnan's Dairy* who Rajan plays without a mask). Laird is particularly unimpressed by the Westernisation of the story of the building of the Taj Mahal, where Rajan assumes a very pronounced 'English' tone to tell a quintessentially Indian story. It is perhaps similar to the way Mason projects his 'English' voice in an attempt to authenticate the New Zealand experience as part of a larger English mythology.

Authenticity, in this regard, is a particularly fraught concept. As per the recent tradition of the Toi Whakaari solo, Rajan refers to his heritage to tell a story to a New Zealand audience and beyond. The audience are perhaps drawn by the fact that Rajan is 'really Indian', even though he has lived in New Zealand most of his life and is, therefore, essentially a Westerner offering a familiar view of the Oriental Other. This seems symptomatic of the idea of fluidity in a multicultural society, where it is possible to assume different 'masks' of identity in a way that may lead to misrepresentation or conform to cultural and colonial stereotypes. Rather than offering the possibilities or potential implied by the idea of fluidity, this reliance on familiar narratives fixes identities to preconceived notions that an audience is comfortable with.

A more complex exploration of identity is posed by the solo performance *Ka Shue/Letters Home*. Here the idea of liminality to which Warrington refers is overtly explored and focussed in the performance – it is the point of the performance. In

relation to *Ka Shue/Letters Home*, Warrington, quoting Marc Maufort, suggests the very definition of “home” is problematic (Warrington 2005,102; Maufort 2003, 140). Writer/performer Lynda Chanwai-Earle refers to her experience as a Chinese New Zealander and considers the experience of her antecedents in the movement from China to New Zealand. It is, she says, a “universal story about immigration” (Chanwai-Earle 2003, 5). The performance is structured in the form of letters written between several generations of women. Chanwai-Earle takes up the role of each woman including the Chinese Matriarch from a Chinese past, and a younger generation in New Zealand (presumably representing Chanwai-Earle herself). This seems especially close to the kind of multiple-role solo performances to which Gilbert and Tompkins refer, which represent the idea of split identities in post-colonial cultures through the solo female performer.

In the dialogue created by juxtaposing these different generations of women, what is proposed is a continuing negotiation of identity. It is suggested that the most recent generation is completely lost – a young woman returns to an alien China as a student at the height of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Directed by Jim Moriarty, it is possible to see this performance as offering an unusual insight into national identity from the perspective of a New Zealander with Chinese heritage, offering an alternative view to a solo performance like *Michael James Manaia*. Such a perspective is significant because Chinese migrants have been coming to New Zealand since the mid nineteenth century gold rush that rapidly increased settlement in New Zealand, but have been marginalised in formulations of national identity.

Warrington points to Chinese cultural forms that are scattered throughout the performance such as Chinese opera. These give colour to the main representational device of the performed letters, which is not unlike Downes’ performing Mansfield’s

journal entries. The quoting of Chineseness conveys the sense of a Westerner looking into the Orient and being confounded and seduced by the mysteries they see, reflecting perhaps the young Chinese/New Zealander's confusion with her place between cultures. This looking at the Other seems poised between exploring the source of this seduction represented by the different generations of women caught between China and New Zealand, 'East' and 'West', and getting lost in that 'otherness' to secure a sense of cultural identity that is different. That is to say, it might be possible to see the sense of ambiguity the performance evokes as being a reflection of Chanwai-Earle's own confusion with identity – similar perhaps to the mystery that surrounds Manaia's consideration of his past.

In *Ka Shue/Letters Home*, though, identity seems to remain in a different kind of no-man's land, between familiar Orientalist images of a former home and a new one that is, so to speak, 'hardly even there'. This may reflect the alienation of those outside the mainstream in New Zealand. It is interesting that Chanwai-Earle says she wanted an Asian audience for *Ka Shue/Letters Home* (Warrington 2005, 104-105); according to Chanwai-Earle however, this audience disliked the performance because of a desire to save face and avoid "shame on the family", an attitude that she sees as being ingrained within the "general" Chinese culture (Warrington 2005, 105). It is also possible this audience has resisted the representation of their cultural heritage from a perspective that may seem Westernized, a further way of aligning a Chinese audience with the mainstream of New Zealand and negating the possibility of difference within a wider community. Similarly, the audience for *Krishnan's Dairy* originally featured a large portion of the Indian community but this decreased as the performance became popular with festivals and toured around the country. This suggests that the primary audience for each solo performance is the white, middle

class audience, with their point of view of otherness mirrored and affirmed in performance.

The effect of such a performance may be to affirm a Western audience's fantasies about the Orient as opposed to a troubling of New Zealand identity from the point of view of somebody outside dominant formulations of New Zealand identity. In what seems an attempt to play on cultural stereotypes as a way of exposing them, the difference may be lost on a New Zealand audience who, as part of a larger Western culture, are used to seeing what Edward Said referred to in *Orientalism* (1978): familiar images of the 'East' that support the notion of Western superiority. Said observes that the relatively recent coverage of the 'East' by Western media leads to a covering or obscuring of difference, which has a long history in the conceptions of Western identity as a masculinized self in relation to a feminised Eastern other. *Ka Shue/Letters Home*, likewise, represents images of an Orient straight out of the popular Western subconscious of the Eastern Other: mahjong; the seductive, yet vengeful concubine, lit up with jade green and dragon red lighting; references to deceitful Chinese businessman; and Chinese myths. The idea of a conflict that might be aroused by a Chinese New Zealander coming to look at New Zealand seems to be transferred to an individual sense of conflict at an internationally recognised site of conflict: Tiananmen Square. Without engaging directly with the Westernised audience and their prejudices it is likely that they will see another representation of an exotic Other. In a way that is more self-conscious than *Krishnan's Dairy* but nevertheless leading to effects that may be similar, *Ka Shue/Letters Home* invites an orientalist gaze as a way of coming to represent and, presumably, to understand the identity of the Chinese New Zealander.

A review of the recent solo performance *The Wholly Grain* suggests that this process is ongoing. Created by Toi Whakaari graduate Sonia Yee, the performance also draws upon her Chinese heritage to comment upon growing up in New Zealand. Reviewer Shannon Huse describes this performance as following a familiar formula to woo theatre audiences in New Zealand:

A new genre of theatre seems to be developing in New Zealand. It started with *Krishnan's Dairy* and has grown to include *The Pickle King*, *From India with Love* and *The Wholly Grain*. They are feel-good, slice-of-life shows that tell the stories of hardworking immigrants who come to New Zealand for a better life. These plays also share the same formula for success: a sprinkle of sorrow, liberal helpings of humour, a seasoning of cultural myth and legend, topped with a big happy ending and the neat resolution of any loose ends. (Huse 2005, online reference)

Although Huse suggests that this is a new phenomenon, the use of solo performance to relay 'other' stories from outside the dominant groupings has become a familiar trend in New Zealand and a broader Western culture. As she suggests, these performances tend towards resolution, a reflection perhaps of the way identity is considered in a global culture, and yet out of keeping with the sense of confusion and unsettledness raised in *Ka Shue/Letters Home* and, to a lesser extent, *Krishnan's Dairy*. *Krishnan's Dairy* certainly ends with a sense of resolution following the climax in which thieves shoot the husband. The end of the performance jumps forward in time to show the once resistant immigrant wife happily taking up her life in the dairy in New Zealand, and her adult son appears at the end without the broad Indian accent of his parents, his kiwi vowels reflecting a local education and, thereby, a sense of assimilation. But this follows the allusions during the performance to the difficulties of 'not being at home', neither here nor there that are also raised, explicitly, in *Ka Shue/Letters Home*. Without talking directly to the audience about the problems of identity, or considering Chinese or Indian myths in the New Zealand context to ground the performance in time and place, there is not the sense in these

solo performances that the issue of identity might also involve the audience/community to which the performer belongs. It ends up looking like an individual problem to be resolved by them without troubling the established notions of national identity held by the audience.

Internationally, the solo performance has become a symbol of drifting and confused identities that appear to be resolved at a personal level without being grounded in the search for a collective experience. During the course of this study, I have seen a number of solo performances from overseas that represent a sense of an individual on the outside, uncertain of their identity, but who come to some sense of personal understanding. For example, Andreas Litras' *Odyssey* (Greek Australian who uses Greek ancestry to explore the idea of having no home), Josephina Baez's *Dominicanish* (who uses her experience of moving from the Dominican Republic to New York and learning English as a means to explore the transience of identity), and David Page's *Page 8* (whose Aboriginal heritage is peripheral to his personal story of overcoming personal odds), have been brought to New Zealand and enjoyed popular success with New Zealand audiences. These performances suggest that in New Zealand and elsewhere, a search for identity at a collective, national level is a thing of the past. For now, it seems knowing who you are, individually (psychologically/spiritually), within broader, established notions of identity, is what audiences enjoy seeing; displaying an exotic mask of otherness on the way to proving that we are, underneath, all the same.

The almost formulaic representation suggested by Huse is symptomatic of a loss of interest in questioning New Zealand identity. It seems that New Zealand is no longer interested in asking "Whaddarya?" the famous demand made at the end of Greg McGee's *Foreskin's Lament*, in which the title character – much like many of

the solo performers I have been discussing – breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience (McGee 1981, 92-96). McGee's play is often spoken of in terms that suggest a coming of age in New Zealand theatre (Thompson 1980, 157; O'Donnell 2007), exploring the fiercely masculine culture behind the national sport of rugby to question who or what New Zealanders might be, or think they might be. The final question repeated by the title character directly to the audience is challenging, emphasizing the confusion, bewilderment and anger that lies beneath an unsettled culture that is uncertain of who it is or where it has come from (much less where it might be going). But the popular and critically well-received solo performances that I have been considering in this chapter suggest that this kind of interrogation is, now, unnecessary at a national level. Rather, these solo performances seem to appeal to 'universal' idea(s) of identity that is already well established.

In other words, it seems as though being *beached*, *grounded* or *returning home* in order to work out a national identity is passé. Instead, recent solo performances suggest the notion of being *On Tour*, celebrating individual identities in a contemporary culture dominated by a global market where a search for the 'national' is replaced by affirmations of the 'universal'.

Despite the sense of fluidity or movement that being *On Tour* may imply, we have seen that it is a more rigid and controlled condition than any of the previous states explored. This rigidity appears to be the consequence of an overwhelming economic logic that looks to establish a 'universal' identity from which 'points of difference' can be recognized. Cultural critics have pointed to the problematic set of assumptions that are the basis for (and arise from) the ideal of the 'universal' in the age of multiculturalism. For example, in his article 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic Of Multinational Capitalism', Slavoj Žižek is direct in his critique of the idea of



the ‘universal’, especially in the way it is used to mask capitalist ideology. Far from the supposedly neutral base it is often purported to be, Zizek points to the political attitude behind the ‘universal’ ideals of multiculturalism:

[M]ulticulturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’ – it respects the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position... [T]he multiculturalist respect for the Other’s specificity is the very form of asserting one’s own superiority. (Zizek 1997, 44)

Rustom Bharucha, quoting Zizek, and making references to his own criticism of intercultural theatre artists such as Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba,<sup>8</sup> suggests that the mentality behind the ‘universal’ erases difference to assert the power of the status quo:

In the empty space of the intercultural meeting ground, which assumes the ‘point zero’ of an authentic ‘first contact’ between ‘essential human beings’, there is a total erasure of the participants’ ethnicities in favour of their universal human identities, creativities, and potentialities. The interculturalist is above ethnicity; he/she is always already human. And therefore, he/she can afford to propose a universality for all, cast in an invariably white, patriarchal, heterosexist image. (Bharucha 2000, 35)

Bharucha suggests that despite the façade of ethnic diversity, the Western style and perspective has become the global template, the default position to which other identities are added or subsumed by an economic neo-colonialism.

In this context, ‘difference’ is perhaps more regional than national (Asia/Pacific, Oceania, Pacific or Australasian rather than New Zealand), and these regional differences seem to be garnish for stock narratives that point to sameness, proof of the universal that resides beneath all cultures. If solo performances from within the male-oriented tradition looked to ground a sense of national identity by representing the transience of identity, contemporary solo performance of the female-oriented approach reflect individual identities that seem to be “rootless” (to use

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<sup>8</sup> For Bharucha’s criticism of the interculturalist theatre see *Theatre and the World* (1993, 13-87).

Zizek's term), endlessly floating (hopefully on top) in a larger brew of somebody else's concocting. Within this brew, identity appears to be fixed and resolved, different perhaps in terms of individual colouring, scent or flavour.

Perhaps *floating* is a better way to describe this process rather than *fluidity*. Fluidity may give the impression of self-determination and direction (active), whereas floating suggests a sense of powerlessness, of being taken and controlled (passive). Contemporary solo performance reflects the overpowering need to go with the flow, to get into an already established market and establish a point of difference to the myriad other voices singing roughly the same tune. In many ways, the idea of solo performance may be seen as the *raison d'être* of contemporary consumer society, a phenomenon such as the *Idol* television series looming as the model most indicative of the times, each contestant attempting to outdo the last with displays of virtuosity. At the same time, performers are tested on their ability to fit the package, the audience deciding who is the most popular according to preconceived notions of quality – the market requires clear generic definitions, not a search for national identity or the experimentation (especially with form) that might come with such a search. In this light, 'originality' and 'authenticity' are rare and fraught terms.

It is possible to see a restriction of the contemporary solo performer as a result of market forces. The television model has come to influence ideas of performance so that brand recognition is an important part of getting work produced. That is to say, audiences are educated in such a way as to desire a particular product. The critique of such performances tends to relate to how well a particular performance conforms to genre rather than the questions it might raise about a collective or national identity. Or, to put it another way, contemporary solo performance in New Zealand reflects a wider paradigmatic shift to *target* an audience (demographic), to fit into a market in

the short term for a viable living and, in the long term, facilitating the kind of exposure that can help build and sustain a career. The use of personal recollection to find a national identity that differentiates *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* from other solo performances suggests the need (implicitly or explicitly) to *create* an audience, echoing a wider process of nation building. Mason et al. ‘took to the road’ with solo performance – both physically and aesthetically – as a means to sustaining a career and discovered along the way that their own search for an identity was matched by the community they lived in. Recently, solo performance appears to reflect the idea of branding: national identity is represented as something already known – it seems to be an identity that the audience understands and sees no point in critiquing.

I do not mean to suggest that the good old days were better. I have pointed to limitations and potential in all the solo performances I have considered. However, the search for a collective identity reflected in the success of *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* points to a passion that is aroused in the search for a national identity. The performances I have considered in this chapter point to a number of troubled identities but, lacking a specific grounding within a time and place that is shared with the audience, the power of theatre to act as a catalyst for *communitas* is lost. While the nationalistic approaches of Mason and Thompson may in some ways be restrictive, their popularity and movement throughout the country over a sustained period speaks of a desire on the part of the audience to congregate around images that assist in the working out of what it means to be a New Zealander. You get the sense that they were really talking to an audience *because* there was a community wanting and willing to have a conversation about what a national identity might be – and whom it might include. The shattering of the

notion of a harmonious bicultural national identity in *Michael James Manaia* happened at a time when biculturalism was said to be in a process of resolution. In these solo performances, the fracturing of identity responds to contemporary debates about a collective national identity – the individual may be seen to become a representative of that collective identity – and it is the desire to engage in this conversation that underpins the meeting between performer and audience. The organising factor of nation-building makes for a political kind of theatre: it is of general concern to performer and audience in a particular time and place – the audience is actively implicated and, therefore, engaged.

Is such a relationship possible today?

To discuss this, I want to examine one final solo performance: *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*. Written by journalist and writer Geoff Chapple and directed by Colin McColl, *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* premiered at the Auckland Theatre Company in 2007. Stuart Devenie played the title role of Joseph Hatch, an entrepreneur, one-time Mayor of Invercargill and short term Member of Parliament who gained national and international infamy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century for his penguin rendering factory on Macquarie Island: Hatch boiled penguins for their oil – one litre per penguin. Naturalists, explorers and writers, including H.G. Wells, vilified Hatch for his business exploits. In 1920 he had his licence revoked by the Tasmanian Government (who administered the island) and became the ‘bogey monster’ for New Zealand children who were terrified by parents with the threat of Hatch taking them away (with the penguins) if they did not behave. Angered by such demonization, Hatch travelled around New Zealand and gave public lectures seeking absolution and public support for the reinstatement of his licence. Using his considerable oratory skills, he pointed out the hypocrisy of those who accused him of cruelty and

exploitation, suggesting that these were the foundations of industry and agriculture the world over and in the emerging nation of New Zealand especially. The performance enacts one of these lectures.

I travelled from Christchurch to Riverton – a seventeen-hour return drive – to see this solo performance. Having read the reviews of the performance in Auckland and hearing that the performance would retrace Hatch's steps and tour through Otago and Southland, it sounded as though this solo performance represented a reanimation of the idea of the actor alone as a theatrical search for a distinctive New Zealand identity. It seemed possible that like *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia*, *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* might use the direct address of the form to explore a collective identity through personal reflection. In the same way that *Michael James Manaia* was deliberately written to use the form of *whaikorero*, *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* is intentionally written as a solo performance, mirroring the illustrative lectures that Hatch conducted more than a century ago. Devenie-as-Hatch, dressed in the formal evening attire of the time and sporting a walrus moustache, works between a lectern and a magic lantern projection.

From what I had heard, I imagined that the performance might exploit the solo performance as a way of engaging with the issues of identity in contemporary New Zealand. That is, rather than following the didactic tendencies of the lecture, I thought the performance might exploit the inherent theatricality of the lecture to create a dialectical relationship between the man and the material he was presenting in relation to a contemporary audience. In particular, the subject seemed a perfect prism through which to examine issues raised by environmentalism and its close association with New Zealand identity, especially in the era of global warming. As evidenced by Hatch's experience in the early twentieth century – where the modern

environmentalist movement was starting – there are inherent contradictions and blindspots in the attempt to align an economic with an environmental stance (capitalism being innately exploitative and environmentalism being conservative and protective). There could be, for example, some interesting parallels between Hatch's extraction of oil from penguins and the Iraqi situation (taking place at the time of the performance tour), which is widely regarded as arising from the attempt to secure that country's vast oil reserves. The type of oil is different; however in both instances those perpetrating the act have defended their actions by suggesting they reflect the fundamental values of their civilisation and culture.

For a New Zealand culture that considers itself to be removed from such debates, an exploration of local exploitation could provoke an interesting debate. New Zealand has, for example, an extraordinarily high rate of car ownership per capita and is, therefore, a significant consumer of oil. In addition to the possible debates about exploiting oil, in the places such as Wanaka and Queenstown to which the performance was toured, there are ongoing tensions between developers and conservationists. In Southland, furthermore, there is the urgent problem of an ever-expanding dairy industry detrimentally affecting natural resources. This is the case especially with water, which presents a two-pronged problem. The high amount of water that is needed for irrigating dairy farms is severely affecting water levels, limiting the amount of water that can be used by others (including the power industry) and jeopardising fragile eco-systems. Secondly, there are problems concerning the chemical run-off from fertiliser used for the dairy industry, a build-up of nitrate being especially disastrous for the health of waterways. This comes just as a warming planet looks to have a significant impact on fresh water resources, perhaps leading to a scenario where water is more valuable than oil.

On the other hand, there are the issues raised by the blindspots of green ideology as it becomes increasingly moralistic, the dogmatic tones of the naturalist movement sounding the very opposite to the analytic stance the green movement claims to take. In such a circumstance there is the possibility of the international 'green movement' becoming authoritarian.

Hence, much can be taken from a story about a turn of the century entrepreneur whose business was boiling penguins for oil. I was excited by the potential of material so provocatively placed between the national and the international. I was also intrigued by the possibilities of a solo performance produced by Chapple, a journalist who has worked on politically motivated radio plays with playwright Dean Parker. Moreover, Chapple is well known as the driving force behind Te Araroa Trust, an organization working to establish a nation long walking track, which, as a 'man alone', he walked in 2002. As a result of this and his experiences exploring New Zealand culture in his memoir *South* (1986), it seemed that Chapple might have a particular insight into New Zealand identity. Chapple considers himself, as a journalist, to have an innate predilection towards extrapolating social history.<sup>9</sup> This clearly comes through in his choice of subject for his first theatre play and his sympathetic portrayal of the title character.

I also thought it possible that Chapple might be working with Devenie on the performance as they went along and that this might offer some insight into the makings of political theatre in New Zealand. That is, I thought they might be attempting to adapt the performance to the particular places they visited. Such an expectation was, in part, raised by a blog accompanying the performance as they travelled south. Chapple and Devenie wrote this as if they were Hatch commenting on

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<sup>9</sup> I spoke to Chapple, Devenie and others involved in the production after the performance in Riverton (May 4 2007).

the people and events they had seen in relation to the character Hatch's "demand for reinstatement of the Macquarie oiling license" (Chapple and Devenie 2007, online resource).

Although I can say (after seeing the performance) that many of the issues raised above could be read into the performance, they were secondary to the biographical focus of Chapple's project. In many respects, the performance was similar to Downes' portrayal of Katherine Mansfield, creating a window into the life and times of a well-known local figure from the past. Like that solo performance, *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* focused on the personal conflict, the inner turmoil of the historical character. In particular, there were poignant moments in which Devenie-as-Hatch recounted how men died (including his own son) in pursuit of his business on Macquarie Island. Nevertheless, compared to the inner turmoil represented in *Michael James Manaia* for example – which is ascribed a social orientation as Manaia goes through his whakapapa – the reflections of Devenie-as-Hatch remained mostly personal and introverted. When Devenie-as-Hatch called for the resumption of the licence because, he said, it was central to the very idea of enterprise upon which New Zealand was founded, the audience were enthusiastic in their support. The audience seemed to play along with the idea – keeping up the act – as opposed to considering their own experience and times.

At the same time, the kind of nostalgic flourish that comes with *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* and other recent biographical solos such as *Muldoon* (2004) and *The Daylight Atheist* (2004) suggests a longing for times when identity was not already known but being searched for – a longing for something 'authentic'. *Muldoon*, for example, can be seen as a return to the role for which David McPhail is most well known, playing former Prime Minister Robert Muldoon, which he first



performed in the satirical television series *McPhail and Gadsby*. This television program is credited as pioneering political satire in New Zealand, a genre that has enjoyed an ongoing popularity with New Zealand audiences, most recently with the *Spitting Image* television series. With *The Daylight Atheist* Tom Scott, who is also a veteran of political satire in New Zealand, also returns to the past to represent his father, an immigrant Irishman.

It is perhaps indicative of the market's pervasive power that these kinds of solo performances seem to end up formulaic almost by default. Much like *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*, both *Muldoon* and *The Daylight Atheist* seem disinterested in the social implications of aloneness on stage. This suggests that the idea of isolation that can be read into such circumstances is related to personal psychological failings. The audience is positioned in a fashion typical of naturalistic drama. They are 'flies on the wall' getting to see the character in a private habitat, and to *see* the things inside the character's head that, usually, the character himself cannot see. The audience comes to know that like the psychological motivations suggested in *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*, the bullying tendencies of the Muldoon and Moffat characters is an attempt to make up for some early mental 'damage'. For the character of Muldoon it is the absence of his father. For the Moffat character it seems to be the experience of being an outsider, resulting from his migration from Ireland to New Zealand. To judge by the audience reaction to these performances (a series of "ahhs" and head nodding), the subtext was read and appreciated by the audience as something recognizable, distinctly individual, buzzing around inside the heads of the men alone on stage.

*Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*, though, is different from *Muldoon* and *The Daylight Atheist* in the deliberate use of the lecture form as subject matter to

engage with an audience. This seems to be particularly evident in the staging of these performances in halls rather than in recognised theatres. It calls to mind a settler past and, potentially, evokes questions about its present and future. From the outset, this performance instructs a different relationship between spectator and performer to conventional theatre. Devenie-as-Hatch harangued latecomers and lamented such behaviour as abhorrent – a sign, he claimed, of the times. This kind of approach seemed to create a greater degree of liveness to the performance compared to the usual naturalistic theatre where the audience is treated as though they are not there.

Talking to those involved with the tour, they felt that this kind of behaviour was in keeping with the way of life experienced in this part of the world. In particular, there was reference to one performance at the Luggate Hall in Central Otago that pointed to a different kind of experience to that of conventional theatre. They suggested that this particular performance pulled an especially local audience, resident in the area for generations. Although each performance was specifically played in a community hall, for many of these performances (as in Wanaka) the audience were newer residents from the larger urban centres that have recently settled in the region, and these newer residents viewed the halls as nostalgically authentic – a quaint reminder of a time now past. In Luggate, however, where the hall is still used as a meeting place for the community, the audience interacted directly with the performance. One local told the touring party that the hall is central to community life – it is a place where the community (mostly farmers separated by the land they farm) gather to discuss issues important to the district – it is efficacious in that issues discussed here lead to action in the community. The community hall is a place where people are used to speaking and having a say, which makes for a very interactive and immediate dynamic. It seems that in seeing *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins* the

audience were particularly responsive to the performance in a way that was different from some of the other performances on tour. That is, because the community is used to the hall as a place where important issues are discussed, they responded to the performance as alive, urgent and relevant to everyday life

The obvious parallel here is marae. There are socio-historical differences that make marae and the community hall distinct affairs in terms of protocol and interaction. These differences reflect the experiences of the indigenous and the settler in New Zealand. However, there is a similarity in focus. Both are a locus for communities and those that come to visit. This includes travelling solo performers who, in coming to the halls, may make connections between the various communities of Aotearoa/New Zealand by telling stories that are shared in common.

On my brief tour of Southland and Otago, travelling the road that took me through the communities where I grew up, I was reminded of the place of the hall, like the marae, in the New Zealand way of life. Almost every settlement you pass has a community/memorial hall – a lone white building seemingly in the middle of nowhere. As a boy, I had attended a variety of different events in community halls: concerts, dances, sports tournaments, film watching, meetings, surprise birthday parties and performances. I also performed in community halls. I had, however, dreamed of getting away to bigger, brighter theatres elsewhere – to a relatively recent settler culture the real world is ‘over there’. However, in a kind of reversal the ‘return home’ to the communities of my youth focused my earlier decision to study solo performance in New Zealand. It reinvigorated my curiosity as to whether this idea of theatre (or aspects of it) – with a directness and relevance that evokes the spirit of community hall and marae – may still play a role in connecting the isolated communities and individuals of New Zealand.

I am wary of the kind of nostalgia that took Thompson back to the community hall of Rununga. His return to the past seemed affected by an idealistic imagining of the community hall. Thompson, though, also discovered a sense of urgency as he travelled south where his experience made sense to communities experiencing socio-economic redundancy. That is, it was performing in community halls around Otago and Southland that allowed Thompson to rediscover the liveness and immediacy of theatre in the direct relationship with the community. It seems that audiences responded to his personal story at a collective level – it allowed them to reflect upon what it meant to be a New Zealander at that time. Thompson's ongoing work could be seen as an attempt to engender the spirit of the community hall in the established theatres of New Zealand.

The community hall is quintessential to the New Zealand experience in a way that the Theatre Royal has never quite been. Theatre Royals – with their raised proscenium arched stage and large ornate auditoriums – were built in all the largest New Zealand towns and cities as a sign of civilisation in the antipodes. However, they have rarely been filled by work from New Zealand; if anything it is still the tours from overseas that are more likely to sell-out a Theatre Royal. In terms of New Zealand theatre, the venues that have been taken up by emerging local theatre companies are usually smaller, more intimate, and are often converted from some other purpose. The Court Theatre, for instance, was originally a lecture theatre in the University of Canterbury before the University was moved to another site. Like other major theatres in New Zealand, there is often the argument that Christchurch's most established theatre is grown-up enough to move into the local Theatre Royal.

Perhaps, though, theatre-makers in New Zealand can learn something from the ethos of the community hall – a place that is necessary for bringing locals together to

discuss important issues and allows for the interaction necessary for forging a sense of community. This, at least, seems to be the lesson learnt by those involved in the tour of *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*, where the tour to the community halls of Otago and Southland revealed an interest in a time and place where New Zealand's national identity was being constructed. A return to the margins, to the ethos of the community hall, may reinvigorate a search for national identity that allows for a sense of community, presence and place.

## Conclusion

### Seeing 'new' sea/land(s) from the beach.

I have argued that, in a particular socio-historical context, solo performance has been a form of theatre that is suited to New Zealand. In the instances that I have explored closely, *The End of the Golden Weather* in 1959, *Coaltown Blues* in 1984 and *Michael James Manaia* in 1991, the performance is designed more with the marae and community hall in mind than the Theatres Royal that were built by the English settlers. As with the action of the marae and the hall, *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* involve a directness and immediacy that come with the gathering of a community, native and settler, to discuss issues of importance to that community.

The dynamics of solo performance seem to have reached a local audience in a way that the conventional theatre with ensemble cast has struggled to do. The conventional theatre's resemblance to theatre from a former home on the other side of the world seems more likely to affirm a sense of distance and isolation. The actor alone, on the other hand, steps out from the established theatre community to confront the isolation that comes with the attempt to maintain the colonial idea of New Zealand as another England. The actor alone confronts the sense of isolation that is central to the New Zealand experience by travelling between settlement, town and city, and referring to a past held in common with communities that are in the process of working out who they might be.

As discussed in the last chapter, it may be that the idea of the actor alone is no longer relevant to New Zealand. But performances such as *Hatch or the Plight of Penguins* suggest that it is possible to exploit or revitalise some of the principles of

the actor alone for ongoing theatre work in New Zealand. In particular, much can be learnt from the way the primary relationship between the performer and spectator can reflect/comment upon the relationship between individual and community. In the idea of actor alone the search for a personal identity is related to a similar search at a collective level. There is the possibility of a sense of community – a coming-together that does not resolve difference, tensions and conflicts but sets the stage for the discussion (hui) that might make such things possible. In this conclusion, I consider what might be taken from the example of the actor alone in New Zealand. I begin by discussing the stance or position taken by the solo performer and how this might be useful for reaching an audience in New Zealand. How might the direct relationship the solo performer establishes with an audience be exploited to invigorate New Zealand theatre?

Differences in class and ethnicity notwithstanding, I feel a certain kinship with the likes of Mason, Thompson, Broughton and Moriarty. With the attempt by Mason and Thompson to create a National Theatre and Broughton and Moriarty's attempts to develop Theatre Marae as an indigenous theatre, I see the potential for a New Zealand theatre that can be immediate and relevant. I am excited by the search and uncharted possibilities of a theatre that grows from, and in relation to, the search for New Zealand identity, and that it might possibly have some effect upon the contours of New Zealand culture – a theatre that goes beyond individual identity politics to create a wider socio-political theatre that engages performer and audience in a dialogue. In doing so, the theatre can respond to a sense of aloneness and an isolation that is both culturally embedded in New Zealand and exacerbated by a contemporary sense of alienation. In different ways, the attempt to commune with an audience according to

contemporary concerns shared in common has been central to the work of the practitioners mentioned above.

At the same time, I'm wary of the way attempts to create a National Theatre or Theatre Marae (or Marae Theatre in the way Broughton uses the term) may also undermine the immediacy of theatre – possibly the very essence of theatre. That is, the attempt to explore collective concerns are affected by the recurring desire to prove a coming-of-age, to be 'all grown up now', or to use Mason's phrase, to be the "made man".

Mason, Thompson, Broughton and Moriarty, in their attempt to establish a distinctive theatre of Aotearoa/New Zealand, all pursued theatre projects that seem geared towards building the foundation for an established theatre. Such an approach suggests the desire to be mature and complete. This approach to theatre suggests an attempt to be, if not the same as then very similar to, the colonial model from England that was adapted by similar post-colonial cultures of the former British Empire. The focus of the careers of Mason, Thompson, Moriarty and Broughton before turning to solo performance had been on creating plays that combined different forms and styles, particularly from European and Maori traditions. What seems to have happened with plays like *The Pohutukawa Tree*, *First Return* and *Te Hokinga Mai* is that in an effort to create an indigenous theatre, playwrights have worked towards an established ideal of theatre that was introduced by the English settlers. This kind of theatre seems to lend itself to a sense of resolution both in form and content suggesting that identity has now been settled – reflected, supposedly, by an ongoing maturity of a New Zealand theatre audience. It seems, though, that the eventual decision to go it alone by each of them reveals that identity in New Zealand is, if anything, in between, liminal



and therefore uncertain as to the constitution of its body, let alone what it might look like as it grows older.

The naturalistic play (based on the well-made play model) continues to be the basis for what is considered theatre in New Zealand. It seems to be the model to which playwrights aspire. This form of theatre seems to be the model that would underline a National Theatre – something that is often called for by those within the New Zealand theatre industry. Every so often, a prominent figure in New Zealand theatre will call for a national theatre, claiming that the time is now ripe for the directing of theatre towards a central model and organization. The theatre audience/community in New Zealand, it is claimed, is now at an age that allows it to appreciate its own images, ideas, and accents on stage – without grimacing or laughing with embarrassment. Other recent experiments such as The Actor's Company have, like The New Zealand Players in the 1950s, had limited success and found it extremely difficult to remain viable. It seems that these kinds of experiments also turn towards staging classic theatre pieces from elsewhere. Meanwhile, New Zealand plays are relegated to school curricula and turned into museum pieces.

The experience of solo performance in New Zealand suggests that embracing marginality and hybridity works better in New Zealand. This is evident in Mason's forays with *The End of the Golden Weather*, further explored by Thompson in *Coaltown Blues* and most fully exploited by the collaborators who produced *Michael James Manaia*. From the earliest to the most recent, the solo form has gone from being a last choice (that to the surprise of the makers goes on to be incredibly successful) to a deliberately crafted piece of theatre that aims to provoke its audience. Not only has the adaptability and manoeuvrability of the form allowed for better access into the places and spaces that typify the New Zealand experience, but the

directness of the relationship between spectator and performer has also allowed for a consideration of what is shared in common.

By referring to the experience of those who feel isolated, *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia* have represented the perspective that seems to respond to a similar sense of marginality in a New Zealand audience searching for a sense of communality. It makes sense that the liminality of such an audience/community should find a corresponding form that sits between more conventional ideas of theatre and presentational forms such as the lecture and the sermon. The alternative approach offers many different possibilities in reaching an audience. The actor alone is more likely to innovate with form and style in an attempt to come to terms with the material reality of a particular environment. It seems logical to look to such individuals as a reflection of the culture in which they live and explore through them a way to live in that culture. The idea of the actor alone suggests that the solo performer is never entirely either alone or on the outside but just as much a product of his environment as the 'insider'.

The actor alone points to a way of approaching theatre that is pertinent to New Zealand. Through the example of the actor alone, it is possible to say that it is more beneficial to forget about trying to be mature and, instead, embrace the youthful aspect of the New Zealand condition. Perhaps, being childlike, curious and naïve is a way to avoid the pervasive and perpetual drive of globalisation towards the homogenizing of identity. The unsettled aspect of solo performance is a very good match for an equally unsettled, and therefore alive New Zealand identity that can change and transform into different forms rather than being stranded, beached or grounded by imitating forms from elsewhere. Rather than seeking continuity and a seamless identity, the use of solo performance beginning with Mason and *The End of*

*the Golden Weather*, suggests that it is worthwhile refusing the temptation to grow up, or to become a “made man”.

At the same time, the rejection of such a ‘male’ stance for a supposedly fluid, ‘female’ one seems fraught with contradiction. In the last chapter, I considered what might be a more ‘female’ approach as suggested by the analysis of Gilbert and Tompkins. Their suggestion that monodrama in post-colonial cultures challenges fixed ideas of identity seemed applicable to the performances I considered. That is to say, the principle of a fluid identity represented by the solo performer can be seen in a number of New Zealand solo performances. This is the case especially with more recent solo performances. But in the New Zealand instance, what seems to be revealed by solo performers that represent more fluid, global identities is the sense of an identities that have already been resolved. That is, these performances that come to represent a sense of fluidity, strangely, suggest identities that have been fixed.

This kind of fixing takes place in different ways. I considered a series of solo performances that may be seen to comment upon a range of identities within New Zealand: female, gay, Indian, Chinese. The idea that these identities are different to the normative position of the white, straight male is central to the stories that the performers tell. That is, the aloneness of the performer on stage may be read as a consequence of the identities he or she has come to represent. These performers have been in some way excluded or marginalised within New Zealand. As a result, they have the potential to offer insight into New Zealand identity in relation to that community as it gathered in the theatre. However, the meeting between the performer and community suggests that a search for an identity that may be found in common is unnecessary. This implies that such an identity already exists. The idea of national identity has been superseded by a larger international or global identity. As a result, it

seems that there is no longer a need to search for identity but, rather, the impetus is on affirming calls for inclusion of others into the wider collective.

This seems to result in a sense of nostalgia. The return to the past is a common feature of solo performance in New Zealand. However, in *The End of the Golden Weather*, *Coaltown Blues* and *Michael James Manaia*, a return to the past comes with the intent to search for a national identity. This is done with an audience in the present and with a view to the future. The nostalgia represented by the solo performances I considered in the last chapter points to a sense of resolution in the present, and, as a result, the future seems already worked out. It seems that all the trouble of negotiating a sense of identity was something that happened long ago. The solo performer comes to stand before the audience with an identity that is complete. There is a sense of unease that is represented by the stories they tell and roles they assume but by the end of the performance this all seems to have been worked out. This kind of fixing that is inherent in the nostalgia of recent solo performance denies the liveness of theatre and the immediacy of the relationship between performer and audience.

To offer another take on this idea of nostalgia in solo performance, I want to consider Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope in the Theatre* (2006). In the introduction, I referred to Dolan as offering a counterpoint to the experience of solo performance in New Zealand. Dolan refers to a number of recent solo performances in the United States to support her argument that theatre may offer a sense of hope and a way of finding a sense of community. It is in solo performance – a form with a long and varied past in the United States – that Dolan finds, as an audience member, a sense of hope. She says that this happens by joining with others to hear the stories of those on the margins. In this way, Dolan offers a similar observation to my consideration of solo performance in New Zealand. That by taking

up the margins (an active form of isolation) the solo performance points to the possibilities and potentiality of theatre to create a sense of community.

Dolan doesn't go into great detail about the formal dimensions of the solo performance. That is, she doesn't discuss how this particular form of theatre is useful in achieving communal contact other than to say that the directness of the form is what creates *communitas*. Her focus is on how Turner's idea of *communitas* allows for what she calls "utopian performatives" (Dolan 2006, 5). She explores a number of solo performances as she discusses this concept. In particular, she follows up her introduction of Turner's term by referring to a nostalgic solo performance called *The Chief* (the date of the performance is not mentioned). In her reference to the performance, it is possible to see some of the problems with using nostalgia in solo performance as a way of searching for *communitas*.

Dolan says this solo performance involved actor Tom Atkins re-presenting Art Rooney, the celebrated owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers (an American football team). Dolan refers to herself and her family as locals with a long history in the Pittsburgh area, and that they knew much of this man. She says that she had not known so much about football, but that she was aware of Art Rooney, such was his place of prominence as a local figure to whom was attached a great deal of civic pride. Dolan points out her stance, in relation to the figure portrayed, in order to emphasize the way in which the performance comes to create *communitas*. She says that Atkins-as-Rooney recollecting the events that had made him famous offered a sense of something that was shared in common by the local audience. She says that at the end of the performance:

Spectators approached the thrust stage like anthropologists shopping for museum artefacts, looking closely at the detailed memorabilia decorating the set, touching (until hurried away by ushers) the photographs and objects that called up such nostalgia, such team spirit, such pride. (Dolan 2006, 12)

Dolan suggests that a solo performance which offered an intimate portrayal of a much loved figure, in the company of the community she came from, allowed her to see for the first time what it meant to “root for the team” (Dolan 2006, 12).

It is hard to say without having seen the performance or being part of that community how the performance might have created *communitas*. I might be able to imagine such a performance perhaps, by considering someone playing mountaineer/explorer Edmund Hillary or rugby player Colin Meads and remembering the past with an audience in the present. But imagining such an idea – especially in relation to the kind of biographical performances I have considered – this kind of nostalgia seems problematic in the way it relates to the present. It is possible to see the potential in these kinds of performances to create *communitas*, if the performances engage/confront a sense of unease in the present. This is what the example of the actor alone suggests. He goes in *search* of an identity that he can only find in relation to a community from which he stands apart. Is it possible for a sense of *communitas* to exist without a *search* in the present? Doesn't an efficacious ritual (on the *marae* for example) offer a challenge to participants – a challenge they must accept if they are to make it through the ritual process?

In the way that Dolan describes *The Chief* it seems as though such a search is unnecessary as a local identity is already established. It sounds similar in relation to a number of solo performances I have seen. These kinds of solo performance open up an interaction between performer and audience that is unusual for mainstream theatre. But many tend to replicate mainstream theatre by offering easily consumed nostalgia for an audience of the already converted. That is, the performance *confirms* a sense of belonging with locals for whom this sports figure is almost an institution, a symbol of

their collective identity. It seems that such a situation is likely to evoke empathy with the other fans according to a set of preconceived ideas about what that community is. Can you really belong to a community if you are not always in the process of searching for one?

At the same time, the performance that Dolan describes may also point to a sense of dissatisfaction with the way ideas of a collective identity are currently imposed. Dolan, for example, suggests that the success of *The Chief* may be related to the way it seems “more local, less corporate, and more ‘real’” (Dolan 2006, 12). This feeling may arise from the situation I discussed at the beginning of the thesis, that is, in relation to feeling alienated from contemporary society. The sense that ‘identity’ is already defined by a market-oriented formula leads to a disconnection from a sense of community, when, ironically, the very opposite is suggested by new technology that is supposed to make connections possible. The introduction of new technology – as with clothes, shoes and food – seems to be directing identity towards niche moulds that typifies and normalizes everyday life and interactions. You are what you buy. This economic logic that pervades everyday life seems to lead to a sense of passivity – possibly a ‘feminising’ of culture – where identity runs fluidly between already established models. The possibility of actually *searching* for an alternative seems impossible. In this way, perhaps the idea of a fluid identity as a reflection of a global, ‘feminized’ culture is as isolating as its former (colonial) ‘male’ counterpart can be.

Reading *Utopia in Performance* from a place that is on the margins of what has recently been an American-centred ‘global’ culture, it is possible to see the spectre of the attacks on the World Trade Centre Towers looming over Dolan’s stance. Dolan acknowledges that this event has rocked that culture and led to ongoing insecurity (Dolan 2006, 3). Dolan’s observations seem to take place in a context

where there is a tendency to normalize, secure and centralise. In American culture there seems to be a heightened degree of conformity and repression. This, she says, has created a need to meet with others as a means of breaking such restrictions. Dolan claims that in this context solo performance offers an example of how theatre can offer just such a break. I think I have a similar hope to that of Dolan: that theatre can offer a place to converse, to explore ideas and to confront the issues that are central to a society at a given time – the theatre as a place of *possibilities*.

Also like Dolan, I think that it is at the margins that there is the possibility of *searching* for a sense of identity and, thereby, a community to belong to. I say this based on my own experiences in the theatre. In particular, let me refer to a recent performance produced by the Free Theatre in 2004 that I performed in: *Ella* (2004). I turn to this performance with a mind to the idea that a place to stand and search is not only at the margins, but also straddling ‘male’ and ‘female’ divides.

*Ella* is a play written by Bavarian playwright, novelist, filmmaker, painter and actor Herbert Achternbusch.<sup>1</sup> It is another example of the kind of provocative and challenging work that can come from the margins. Achternbusch’s work may be seen to reflect his perspective as a Bavarian on the outskirts of a wider German culture. This was the reason why the project under the title *Achternbusch in the Antipodes* was instigated by director Peter Falkenberg and commissioned by the University of Canterbury’s Te Puna Toi Performance Research Project in Christchurch. It offers an interesting counterpoint to New Zealand as a culture on the margins. In this way perhaps, it can be seen as an inversion of the tendency to imitate an international model as a way of getting closer to the centre – taking an international example and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ella*, directed and translated by Peter Falkenberg, Free Theatre, 2004. The performance was part of a larger exhibition of Achternbusch’s work that included two other of his plays: *Susn* and *My Epitaph*. They were all performed at Old Queen’s Theatre in Christchurch, and later that year in Wellington as part of the ‘Listening to the Image’ conference organized by Victoria University for the Australasian Drama Studies Association.



looking back at a New Zealand culture on the margins. Achternbusch deliberately takes up the margins and the position of the marginalized. This includes rejecting inclusion in mainstream artistic groups that look to centralise work under the umbrella of a larger more dominant culture. In 1977, he famously put his money where his mouth is, so to speak, “setting fire to the 20,000 DM Petrarca Prize awarded to him”.<sup>2</sup> For Achternbusch, the margins are an area that he occupies fiercely, an approach that is reflected in the form and content of his work, including *Ella*, which explores his mother’s repeated institutionalisation.

The performance involves a man standing in a chicken coop dressed in a chicken wig and apron, recounting his mother’s life as if he *were* his mother. The performance also involves another actor who plays the mother, sitting catatonic in the background. In the Free Theatre performance, the mother (Marian McCurdy) sat in front of a television, unmoving except for the odd jerk or convulsion. She watched a continuous loop of chickens attacking and eating other, lame chickens – an allusion to the role that television plays in relaying the competitive ethos of a contemporary culture fuelled by rampant consumer-capitalist ideology. The footage is borrowed from the 1969 film *Even Dwarfs Started Small* by Werner Herzog, another Bavarian and one-time Achternbusch collaborator. The son occasionally looks to the mother while he makes coffee for his guests, the audience.

Although this is a two-person performance the dynamics are similar to the relationship between performer and spectator that I have observed in solo performance. It is virtually a solo performance. The mother in *Ella* is essentially an inanimate prop or part of the set, perhaps playing a role akin to the white hat that represents the absent John Middleton Murry in *The Case of Katherine Mansfield*.

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<sup>2</sup> From the Te Puna Toi website: [www.tafs.canterbury.ac.nz/tepunatoi](http://www.tafs.canterbury.ac.nz/tepunatoi).

Mostly, it is the audience to whom he speaks and with whom he interacts during the performance, as he works out (with them) the events that led to his mother's state and, hence, he to his own. It is after recounting the harrowing tale of his mother's life – abused by family members, different men, institutions and authorities – that the son laces his own coffee with cyanide and drinks it. The performance ends with the son dying and the mother screaming.

Achternbusch describes *Ella* as the sequel to Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960). He offers a very different take on the classic thriller, in which the twist in the tale is the appearance of pathological killer Norman Bates dressed as his mother. As a sequel, *Ella* offers an emphasis on the social dimension of such a story rather than the psychological emphasis of *Psycho*. In this way, there is much in *Ella* that is reminiscent of *Michael James Manaia*, which arose from Broughton's looking at the social dimensions of a popular television commercial. In both *Ella* and *Michael James Manaia* the mysterious surroundings and circumstances of the action are revealed only as the performance progresses. Another similarity between the two (as well as a number of other solos) is the aloneness (isolation) of the protagonist as both a literal and symbolic provocation, the meaning of which is to be worked out (searched for) by the audience.

In this way, *Ella* may be seen to represent a coming together of the 'male' and 'female' strands that have been explored through this thesis. Seeing myself as a man playing a woman is, in some ways, a reflection of where I stand. That is, the socio-historical position I find myself in is somewhere between my settler heritage (a masculine tradition), and a participant in a contemporary culture (a feminised culture). I've discovered through writing this thesis that I'm somewhere in between – I'm not sure where. But I want to explore my own performance of these roles in *Ella*, and

how this might show the potentials and limitations of creating theatre by approaching (acknowledging) that identity is liminal rather than well-made and complete. This is suggested by the role-play in *Ella*, where the son attempts to work out who he is by playing his mother. It involves a *search*. The search is reflected in the form and content of the performance, which is a sprawling, rambling monologue that suggests somebody who is disturbed, not-quite-right looking for who he might be – he does so by returning to the past to tell his mother’s story as if he is his mother.

This search for identity might first be considered in the socio-historical context in which *Ella* was written. In the German context, the disturbing element of the son’s search for the mother’s identity (and through her his own) may be seen to reflect a post-Hitler Germany that was struggling to find a sense of national identity. Achternbusch’s mother is of a generation that survived the Second World War, a generation that was shaken from the ‘dream’ of Nazi Germany to the reality of the events undertaken in their name, and an uncertainty of how to cope. The loss of an identity brought on by a sudden collective amnesia is represented in the story of someone whose past is littered with incidences that coincide with the uneasy post-war period. For example, the son-playing-mother recounts that she was made pregnant and then abandoned by an American soldier – possibly signifying the American influence in post-war Germany. In the revelation of such a past, it is possible to read a recent cultural history that has been disowned, never spoken of, in which unspeakable things happened. In the German context, the directness of the son-playing-mother talking to the audience may represent the need of the following generations to confront such silences and reveal the circumstances of the immediate post-war years that led to the catatonia of Germany society.

It is provocative, I think, to make a comparison between a post-war Germany and New Zealand in 2004. It was provocative to me to play the disturbed son of a catatonic mother (country), and to assume the role of that mother to work out who she is – to see that I am her in some ways. Historically, it is possible to see a similarity in the way a past is continuously being forgotten in post-colonial New Zealand, repressed, leading to a sense of unease in its revelation in the present. This has been evident in the solo performances I have considered through the thesis, which arise from a need to negotiate an unresolved past with the audience. In the figures of Firpo and Miss Effie Brett in *The End of the Golden Weather*, Thompson's mother in *Coaltown Blues*, and Manaia in *Michael James Manaia*, there is a representation of the insanity that arises from a past repressed. The condition is ongoing, considering the recurrence of unease/dis-ease and death (even if only peripherally) that recurs in solo performances as diverse as *The Case of Katherine Mansfield*, *A Long Undressing*, *Krishnan's Dairy* and *Hatch or the Plight of the Penguins*. Maybe, stand-up comedy is so popular in New Zealand because it allows the audience to laugh at such instances – a form of therapy perhaps. The recurrence of such forms in New Zealand culture might even be called an obsession.

In each instance of 'madness' explored in solo performance in New Zealand, the character's state of lunacy can be read as part of a social condition that effects/infects the individuals within it. This is also clearly the case in *Ella*, as the story told by the son points to a social attitude maintained by the ailing mother to keep up appearances, to work towards 'cleanliness' and order, even as a series of horrendous events leads to her being ostracized by society. In the Free Theatre production an allusion to the larger world is supported by the chicken images in which such attitudes see the lame and sick being eaten alive by other starving

chickens that are looking to support their own survival. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, theatre in New Zealand seems to support this kind of cleanliness at a social level, making seamless a past that, arguably, has created an unacknowledged class system. In the Free Theatre production of *Ella*, we worked with the idea of cleanliness both in form and content, with, for example, the coffee being made for the audience coming after (or from) an obsessive cleaning of the coffee machine (Ella's only possession) by the son-playing-mother.

This production was unusual in relation to other recent work I had been involved in, which had largely been physical theatre and less spoken text. This performance, however, was mostly text-based which actually brings it closer to what an audience would be used to in terms of theatre in New Zealand. At the same time, the directness of the performance was unusual compared to mainstream theatre in New Zealand and was clearly discomfoting for many in the audience who did not quite know where to put themselves. The confrontation was compounded by the set design (Richard Till). The audience were cooped up in a small room. To get to their chairs they had to walk past me (as son-playing-mother) as I stood in a chicken coop (complete with live, often very vocal, chickens). The audience had to pick up and arrange their chairs, which were laid helter skelter within the room. From the beginning, then, the audience were implicated in the performance, their act of walking past Ella and her son and taking up their chairs (tidying the room) all significant, literally and symbolically, in the encounter.

It took me some time, through the course of the performances, to exploit the direct relationship with the audience. A greater exploitation of the situation came as I started to engage the Brechtian potential of multiple role-playing. That is, it was more interesting when I began to play the son *searching* for who his mother might be in

relation to (and with the help of) the audience. To begin with I had a tendency to move towards empathising with the mother (in a Stanislavskian-type way), as if I *were* the mother without maintaining the analytical distance suggested by the son's presence. I think this engendered a similar kind of sympathy from the audience. In doing so, it is easier for an audience to write off the character – to see his behaviour as a personal (psychological) rather than a social problem – just another *psycho*. To engage at a social level makes the likelihood of developing a sense of community all the greater because the audience come to see that they too are implicated.

This reassessment was what the Free Theatre production of *Ella* attempted to provoke. As I say, it seemed to work best when I managed to play the son *searching* for who his mother might be. It was far more interesting maintaining a degree of distance between son and mother, making the act of recollection more inquisitive and urgent rather than continuously hysterical. At these times there seemed to be a greater degree of attention from the audience, a response I felt to be more analytical than voyeuristic (both perhaps). This carried over into the discussions that followed the performance. Rather than simply being patted on the back – perhaps a more usual response to a performance – people wanted to discuss or, alternatively, vent their own experiences of coming into contact with ‘nutters’ or ‘psychos’ and to discuss family members who were ‘a little (or whole lot) out there’. Possibly the most interesting discussions were about the need to share stories, to talk with others as a means of exorcising the voices in our heads – that this is something we do not do for a number of different reasons, and that those reasons are socially oriented and not just individual.

In these instances, it was brought home to me the power that comes with the more direct approach of theatre, the liveness and immediacy that is the very essence

of theatre: talking with the audience – working it out with the community from which I have come. The solo performers that I have read about or spoken to during the writing of this thesis, regularly refer to the idea that the more direct exchange with the audience that comes with solo performance, both in terms of form and content, leads to spectators coming up after the performance and sharing their own experiences. Theatre in this instance is a kind of communion. *Communitas* comes with the *search* for something that is unknown, in the presence of others who share similar as well as different experiences.

For me, the experience with *Ella* pointed to the possibilities that arise when working from the margins. Through the writing of this thesis I have discovered that solo performance has been, at some stages, a form of theatre that, working from the margins, created a sense of national identity but that that may not be the case now. I intend to test this by continuing to work on a solo performance with the benefit of what I have discovered in this thesis. However, in a broader, more general way, this thesis has revealed the ways solo performance has created a live, direct and dynamic New Zealand theatre, and that these methods might be applied to ongoing theatre making here, and, possibly beyond. New Zealand (and the world) is still growing (up?). Standing on the beach it is possible to see that “new” sea/lands may be still be on the horizon (to find, to create, to hope for?). So I re-turn to the land where such hope might be found, catch a bus, and go to the theatre.

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