

## **Wan Smolbag's Theatre in Vanuatu and the New Zealand Connection**

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Filed Under: [Home](#) » [E-Journals](#) » [New Zealand Journal of Research in Performing Arts and Education: Nga Mahi a Rehia](#) » [Volume 2](#) » **Wan Smolbag's Theatre in Vanuatu and the New Zealand Connection**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the connection that exists between a Vanuatu based theatre, film and television company called Wan Smolbag and one of its donor countries, New Zealand. The paper begins with an introduction to the company, and relevant economic history of Vanuatu, followed by an examination of the background to the New Zealand connection; in particular, the government's reason for its involvement. Interviews with company principal, Peter Walker and a New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad worker, Ana Terry, serve to establish further connections between the two countries, as well as providing an insight into the workings of the company, its range of activities, governance, challenges, perceived opportunities and continued reliance on New Zealand government and non-governmental support for its activities.

### **Introduction**

Wan Smolbag Theatre in Vanuatu has developed a strong connection with New Zealand since 1989, as a result of contact through government and non-government organizations. Wan Smolbag has a unique mix of creative enterprise which is unparalleled in the Pacific region with a portfolio consisting of theatre, film, television, radio, music CD, and print educational resource production, health and reproductive services and nutrition education. In addition, the youth centre operations offer education and activities in literacy, visual art, rap dancing, sport, karate and computing, teacher in service education programmes and the development of a restaurant with a trainee focus.

In June 2009, Wan Smolbag celebrated its twentieth year of existence by hosting the first International Theatre Festival ever held in Vanuatu. This article, which explores the nature of the New Zealand connection, is based on interviews I conducted during the festival with Wan Smolbag's artistic director, Peter Walker and Ana Terry, a New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad worker. My personal connection with Wan Smolbag is that I have been very fortunate to have been able to visit the company twice in the past five years and to promote sales of their film and television programmes to Maori Television.

### **Background – The New Zealand Connection**

Wan Smolbag Theatre Company is a thriving non-governmental organisation (NGO), working not only in Vanuatu but also throughout the South Pacific. Such is the prestige of the company that it manages to receive ongoing, core funding for its multitude of activities from two key government agencies, New Zealand's, NZAID – Nga Tuputupu-mai-tawhiti and Australia's AusAID; 'working together for a positive future for youth'. (Wan Smolbag,

2009). [1] A direct result of this funding arrangement is that the company has been able to make a real impact by nurturing the local population to use their copious talents to tell their stories through the medium of theatre, film, radio and television in a highly sophisticated and entertaining way. It must be acknowledged, at the outset, that none of this would be happening if it was not for the dedication of two key founding members of Wan Smolbag Theatre; Jo Dorras and Peter Walker.

Wan Smolbag Theatre began with 15 voluntary actors in 1989 but has since grown to the point where there are now over 100 paid members of staff and 300 volunteers. As the Wan Smolbag website states: “Coupled with structured workshops facilitated by actors, the organisation uses drama to inform, raise awareness and encourage public discussion on a range of contemporary health, lifestyle, environment and governance issues.” (Wan Smolbag, 2009).

The Republic of Vanuatu is situated north-west of New Zealand. The land area is tiny with 12,190 sq km covering four main islands, and eighty smaller islands. Most of the 223,000 ‘ni-Vanuatu’ population are predominantly Christian and they speak a mixture of Bislama, English and French. In addition there are approximately 115 ‘mother tongues’ in common use. (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2009). Once a condominium governed by France and Britain, Vanuatu is a Republic based on Westminster Parliamentary model where the national government consists of a five party coalition led by Vanua’aku Pati (NUP). The economy, which is based largely on the export of agricultural products such as copra, coconut oil, beef, kava, timber and cocoa, has “shown encouraging signs of sustained growth, after more than a decade of stagnation. This has been driven by foreign investment in services, tourism and land development – attracted by Vanuatu’s recent relative political stability and successful institutional reforms.” (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2009).

The period of growth has not been without its cost, however, and the impact of that cost has been keenly felt, as families struggle to feed, clothe, educate and find jobs for the young people who are increasingly attracted to the bright lights of Port Vila. The attraction has its downside and Wan Smolbag’s business is to support young people, in particular, and the local population, in general, by providing them with a tool, a mirror of theatre, film and television and radio through which to examine their changing world.

New Zealand recognizes that it has an important role to play in Pacific development by encouraging good governance practices, sustainable economic development, education, and support for the position of women and children in society. (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2009). Wan Smolbag Theatre has already made a significant contribution towards helping New Zealand to meet those targets.

Currently eighteen percent of Vanuatu’s imports come from New Zealand, but in return New Zealand only imports a tiny amount of goods. (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2009). The Wan Smolbag funding connection helps to tip the financial scales in Vanuatu’s direction. New Zealand’s investment, coupled with funding from other countries, has resulted in Wan Smolbag’s programmes and drama educational materials being made widely available throughout the republic.

The sheer volume of materials produced by Wan Smolbag for use in schools is impressive. Most of the material relates to plays, and film and television productions are written by Jo Dorras, usually with input and workshopping by the company. There are more than 20 separate titles available to be downloaded free of charge from the Wan Smolbag website. (Wan Smolbag, 2009)

There is no doubt that Wan Smolbag Theatre punches above its weight in many ways. The results of its programmes are talked about throughout the Pacific and the popularity of the company within Vila itself is evident on day to day basis. It is impossible, for example, to take a taxi ride on Efate without having a conversation with the driver about Wan Smolbag. Drivers will recount the plot of the last play they saw and talk about the popularity of the long running radio serial, *Famili Blong Serah* ( Sarah's family), (Walker 1989) whose broadcasts have been known to stop the traffic in Vila. [\[ii\]](#)

*Love Patrol* (Walker 2007, 2008) is a 10 part series that has been screened by Maori Television in New Zealand. Now into its third series of development, the *Love Patrol* series is written by Jo Dorras and directed by Peter Walker. By the time Series One ended, according to the Vanuatu Daily Post, the actors had become household names:

There were many stories too about people rushing home on Sundays to watch the series and also people flooding into other people's houses to watch. At Sorovanga School they allowed people in to watch the series on Sunday and Thursday, 'People run to get there,' said Moses Joel, one of the crew who filmed the series and lives in the area, 'they ran because those who got there last couldn't get in and ended up waiting outside.'

### **Love Patrol Promo:**

The aim of the series, which was funded by the Pacific Regional HIV/AIDS Project through AusAID, NZAID, SPC and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, was to hook people into watching an entertaining series and at the same time to inform them about the sickness and also to make people aware that AIDS is here today and many people, even those who are married, are in danger from the disease. (Wan Smolbag 2009).

The subject matter of Wan Smolbag's radio, theatre, television programmes and films is always challenging, which, for the majority of the local population and the donors, is not only desirable, but almost a requirement. The themes deal with matters close to the bone, related to such topics as sexually transmitted diseases, infidelity, destruction of the environment, land ownership, government corruption, power and control, the power and influence of the church over people's lives, youth unemployment and negative behaviours, forced marriage, the impact of witchcraft, poverty, access to education and the impact of health related matters such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, diabetes and hypocrisy.

New Zealand has funded Wan Smolbag to bring these issues into the classroom through a Student Centered education project using their materials and the guides that go with them. The project works in Fiji, Solomons and Vanuatu; training teachers and NGO workers how to use the materials and involve their participants in discussion and role play around important development topics.

NZAID, together with AusAID, became further involved by providing core funding, for the development of a Youth Center. By piecing funding together, Wan Smolbag was enabled, in 2003, to buy the land to build a sports court and Nutrition Centre behind the existing Wan Smolbag premises.



A scene from *The Battalion*. Photo credit: <http://www.wansmolbag.org>

While much of the support from New Zealand comes from direct grants, some other key New Zealand agencies have been involved with Wan Smolbag's projects. For example, films have been made with the support of Oxfam New Zealand. Most recently, Te Rakau, a Wellington based, Maori youth focused theatre company attended Wan Smolbag's International Theatre Festival 2009 with the support of Creative New Zealand.<sup>[iii]</sup>

### **Interviews with Peter Walker and Ana Terry– Roles and Definitions**

I interviewed Peter Walker and Ana Terry in their busy offices in Vila on June 1, following the opening of the Wan Smolbag International Festival 2009, about the work of the company and the New Zealand connection.

Peter explains his role in the company as that of being a founding member of Wan Smolbag theatre and its current artistic director. He describes the style of theatre of theatre, film, television and radio production that Wan Smolbag presents as being on a range of levels at any one time.

We can do a play for village level that is very different from the kind of thing you saw last night *40 Dei*<sup>[iv]</sup> (Walker 2009), which you couldn't take to a village very easily. We do the whole range with lots of lights and a band, through to what you can carry in Wan Smolbag, as the name suggests. Similarly [we do the same] with film; although most of our film is relatively high end for here, in the sense that you can't do it without a lot of gear. We get in a D.O.P from Australia who brings the film up to a different level. A ten part series that we do here is still done on the smell of an oily rag, compared to what it would be done for in Australia or New Zealand.

He uses various terms to describe his work, depending on the funder's needs, which include: 'Theatre', Theatre of Sustainability, Theatre of Impact, Community Theatre and Theatre for Development. Peter commented:

I've written a chapter just recently for the Commonwealth of Learning book[v] which was about the use of Development Theatre as a distance learning tool. I don't really believe in any of these terms. I believe in theatre because I like doing it. I like acting. I like directing and I like working with people from this country. I think that's the great thing about working with drama. It does cut across cultures. Old and young, black and white can work together, for the same end, whereas in some other spheres it's not so easy.

## **History of New Zealand's Support for Wan Smolbag**

Peter explained how New Zealand came to be involved with Wan Smolbag.

The British pulled out of the Pacific in 2000, and it was about that point that Oxfam New Zealand[vi] got involved through funding us to build a radio station in '99. New Zealand got involved with a governance project and regional education project around that time. Governance for us means what effects people in their daily lives and how decisions are made at village and family level, as well as the 'government' side of governance. It could take on everything from direct political corruption issues, through domestic violence, adopting health rights and a whole range of rights. It's also about how we manage ourselves as an organization.

New Zealand's been with us for about ten years now and we have just been reviewed and are ready to sign an agreement for a further 5 years core funding.

In the last five years, [New Zealand's financial input has] exceeded half a million dollars so if you include the regional programme as well, about \$600,000 a year comes from New Zealand to Smolbag Theatre. They also contributed to the second series of *Love Patrol* through their funding to SPC.[vii] (Walker 2009) That's a separate one. So they are equal biggest donor with AusAID – if you take the regional project into consideration, slightly bigger.

## **Community Benefits of Wan Smolbag**

Peter explained what it means to the community to have 106 people on the payroll who are being paid at least the minimum wage. He said, "They're able to get real job satisfaction from their job and information that may help their families in their daily lives. And those families will include large numbers of people."

## **Educating the Workers and Governance**

Peter discussed the operational structure of Wan Smolbag as being a 'flatocracy'. He explained that, while he obviously has some influence, it is Michael Taurakoto, Wan Smolbag's major manager and political figure, who is highly regarded for his brave stances on many of things. Typically, he and Peter and a few others, both local and 'expat,' will meet with Donors. Various sections operate independently. At the Annual General Meetings and the pre AGMs discipline issues come up and a smaller panel is selected to meet with some of

the major cases for the year. Then they are brought back to the AGM and they can still alter the decisions made by the small committee. Peter commented that, “the structure of the company decrees that 25 core actors and some from other departments have a right to take a vote on everything from salary levels through to whether or not somebody should be dismissed.” For Peter, this represents a good reason why Wan Smolbag retains its staff. “They feel they have a genuine stake in where it’s going – what kinds of behaviour are acceptable round here.”

There are layers of governance within governance for the company to attend to. Peter commented that consciousness was being raised by the way people took part in the programme. He explained that, even in the Youth Centre and with its own staff, Wan Smolbag has to deal with domestic violence issues, equality issues, and transparency issues. These things are a daily factor of their work.

According to Peter, many of the people who are working at Wan Smolbag have come from families where they have witnessed violence from a young age. On the one hand, it might be simple to eject someone for breaking the rules related to the use of violence but, on the other hand, this would not be help that person. Deciding when a person is no longer acceptable on the premises is very difficult. It leads to many hours of meetings because of the participatory process of discipline within Wan Smolbag.

The participatory process can appear exhausting but for some people who witness it they find it quite fascinating. Peter agreed that New Zealand’s system of Restorative Justice could be similar to this process and he agreed that families sometimes became involved. The key thing was that this process is a core part of the Wan Smolbag structure, which at times can be frustrating for all concerned.

### **Administration Support: New Zealand’s VSA and UniVol Programmes**

Peter talked about the number of staff involved in administration, and fundraising. This is often an area which soaks up a large number of people in a theatre company.

“At present, we have about six finance staff alone and about five or six project managers. And then you get people like Ana [Terry] and there’s a couple of UniVols from New Zealand involved in the Youth Centre. [\[viii\]](#) So there’s a sort of range of volunteers as well who are coming [to work with us].”

Ana Terry is a NZAID funded Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) worker from New Zealand. She is the third VSA worker to have been with Wan Smolbag. The first VSA worker, Alison Moore, was employed for five or six years with Wan Smolbag – a huge commitment by anyone’s standards. Her partner, John Herd is now the IT manager at WSB, responsible for encouraging promising youth to build their IT management capacity.

Peter commented on the importance of the VSA scheme in developing the training of local people in new areas such as print media. “It’s very handy to have a volunteer to produce a quality thing, whatever it may be, for use (in the theatre) and at the same time train a counterpart.”

But Ana Terry, who has a large, valuable skill range, has found it difficult to bring beginners into the graphic design field. At the same time, Otago University's UniVol scheme is seen to be very popular with the myriads of young people at Wan Smolbag, because the young people are on a more equal footing with the youth volunteer. Peter commented:

There's nothing wrong with that. It has to be that way. But the thing about the UniVols is they are youth with youth. And they've got skills that they can offer in sport. It's a very easy going relationship. And simply a great chance for both cultures to be exposed to each other.

Finding a ni-Vanuatu counterpart has been particularly challenging for Ana Terry. As she explained, "A counterpart is somebody who is ni-Vanuatu, who is working alongside you. And you are transferring a skill set to that person, ultimately for them to take over the role completely."

The company works with a number of ni-Vanuatu illustrators. In addition to producing seven new comic books written by Jo Dorras in 2008, Ana Terry also produced a CD cover for the Wan Smolbag CD, called *9 Long 1 Step Wan* (Meakes 2008).

**Audio: Raga (Viatu) [Track 1] 2:46 from the Album *9 Long 1 Step Wan***

She explained the process of making the CD involving nine string bands with the Pentecost based Youth Centre. [\[ix\]](#) Ana commented:

That was quite an achievement getting all these guys together to make a recording. They got Andrew Meakes, an Audio Engineer based in Port Vila, who went up with all the recording gear and they recorded it onsite in the Youth Centre. [\[x\]](#) It was great to be involved in this project.



Ana Terry also produced a CD cover for the WanSmolbag CD, called *9 Long 1 Step Wan* (Meakes 2008)



CD cover for the WanSmolbag CD, called 9 Long 1 Step Wan (Meakes 2008)



Haulua Centre

Ana has also been involved in the creation of the DVD cover designs for Wan Smolbag's latest film, *Las Kad*, a theatrical piece that has been developed and made into a film. It is youth orientated, as all Wan Smolbag material is. It looks at Nakaimas (Black Magic), the use of marijuana and there are also issues around human rights, such as the treatment of prisoners.

One of the challenges that Ana had as a VSA worker, was to become literate in Bislama, which is a phonetic language. A dictionary has been produced by Terry Crowley, but often there are two or three spellings of the same word, different ways depending on their own dialect or their phonetics.

Ana Terry hopes that the legacy of her time will be that her counterpart, Florence Toka, will continue to develop her skills in the area of graphic design and that the visual communications work she has done might help to lift that public profile for Wan Smolbag. She believes that there is a need to continue the relationship between VSA and Wan Smolbag in the same field, because the publications and the DVDs and the plays come as a package and have reached such a high level and are proving to be valuable educational tools both locally and in the wider Pacific.

## **In the Mix – Theatre versus Film and Television Production**

Wan Smolbag always has to juggle its time and funding accountability in terms of theatre versus film and television programmes. Peter explained:

To fly a group of actors around the country or occasionally, as we used to do, the region, is very expensive ... So I suppose the move into film in the Pacific in some ways is about that business of being able to get (even if it doesn't have quite the power in some ways, or the excitement or immediacy of a live performance) to get the same ideas out across the region.

Personally speaking it's been quite a journey for me because my background before coming here was totally theatre, and so I've become a film director as well. And that's been at times maddening but exciting to discover another language, another way of working.

Peter explained that the pressure varies from year to year. *Love Patrol* (Walker 2009) is very time consuming to make. He is very fond of making the one-off films, particularly his most recent film, *Las Kad*, which was an adaptation of the play *40 Dei*. (Walker 2009). Peter commented:

It was an interesting way of working with a hybrid. Taking a stage play, and yet partly making it for film. And all those opportunities are kind of lost because *Love Patrol* (Walker 2009) takes up five months of the year. When you consider post production, which actually after the Rough Cut I have little to do with except I have to watch it, you know, lock in comments – it takes a good seven months of our time.

This year is phenomenal. It's the first year ... every two years we have to do one of these major stage productions like *40 Dei* (Dorras 2009). And it's the first time that the *big play* and *Love Patrol* have clashed. So it's very, very exhausting. We're a bit frightened by it. So it depends from year to year. One year, theatre will be more dominant and in another year film.

For Wan Smolbag, the pressure is on because not only does the funder inevitably see the video programmes, as, for example, a very educational tool on HIV, but also there is the wider acknowledgement of the donor for something bought by Maori TV or ABC International. Maintaining this level of work can also have its downside, when funders accuse Wan Smolbag of spreading itself too thinly. Peter's answer to this is:

.... you'd have to give us even more money than you are giving us now because we have to plug that nine million Vatu gap[xi] in our salary bill if we are to maintain this level of work. One day, it might come quite soon, we will have to downsize. But even if everything this kind of thing goes we can build a large kastom house perhaps something like the Chief's Nakamal on that land. We've got all the lights. We've got all the rostras. We could locate to our own land and be a much smaller institution.

## **Wan Smolbag's Education and Health Programmes**

In addition to its theatre programme, Wan Smolbag currently operates three health clinics with probably the most qualified local nurses in sexual health matters. Wan Smolbag was the

first to offer a youth clinic in Vanuatu and UN agencies like UNFPA have helped out with many training courses, as well as attachments and courses at Fiji School of Medicine... The Ministry of Health frequently sends their own nurses on attachment to the clinic from outlying areas for them to see how services can be delivered to the youth.

## **Looking to the Future**

Peter talked about his future plans for Wan Smolbag Theatre. He commented,

“The two hardest areas to fill are directing and writing. And it’s not for want of trying, particularly on the writing side. We’ve run a number of workshops around the place.”

Looking ahead to the next ten years, Peter and Jo would both be really thrilled if one or both of those positions were shared with new writers and directors. They would also love to see another festival happen, for example, with a chance for young directors in other countries to be brought in. He talks about the extraordinary depth of talent that exists among the actors in particular in Vanuatu. But he is sometimes irritated by donors from outside the theatre who think actors should do everything. Peter’s response is, “Sure there can be actor/writers, director /actors but nonetheless, acting in itself is a skill. We have a company of such strength and depth, I would hope that even if Jo and I moved on, donors would not say, ‘Oh no it will all go to pot because they’ve gone!’”

## **The New Zealand Contribution: Looking Ahead**

I wondered what there was, in terms of the long term picture for Wan Smolbag, within New Zealand education or theatre in education or Drama in Education realm that New Zealand could offer by way of support.

Peter spoke warmly about the contribution being made by the visiting directors to the international theatre festival and how glad he was that the company would have exposure to other ways of working with actors and directors not only from New Zealand but also from Australia and other Pacific Islands.

He said, “If something like this could become biannual it would become very interesting. I think it would be less exhausting next time round because we’d know some of the things that we need.”

## **Conclusion**

This writer would contend that there is no doubt that the work of Wan Smolbag should continue to be supported by New Zealand’s government and non-governmental agencies. A report overwhelmingly endorsing the work of the organization was prepared for the NZAID in 2007 by David Small. [\[xii\]](#) (Small 2007) The output of the company is extraordinarily prolific and professional by any measurement. It is important that funding is found to conduct long term research into the social, health and economic benefits of the company to Vanuatu as a country. The cultural capital that has been created in the Pacific by the existence of Wan Smolbag is to be celebrated, emulated and talked about.

New Zealand could also do well to emulate the work that has been carried out with its own theatre, radio, music, film and television programmes based in South Auckland, where there is a similar population with similar needs. It is the author's opinion that it would be wise to invite representatives of Wan Smolbag, including Peter Walker and Jo Dorras, to become involved in a New Zealand Community Theatre project that can bear fruit as a result of this close relationship.

The continued success of Wan Smolbag Theatre is largely dependent on its ability to receive ongoing support from international donors in general but, in particular, from the New Zealand and Australian government and non-governmental agencies.

**For more information:** [www.wansmolbag.org](http://www.wansmolbag.org)

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## Notes

1 The Major Donor and Groups chart shows the relationship with Wan Smolbag  
<http://www.wansmolbag.org/admin/download/wsborgchart.pdf>

2 Wan Smolbag's original idea for a radio drama about reproductive health issues was initially turned down by Radio Vanuatu in 1989 on the grounds that it dealt too directly with sensitive issues. Ten years later, as HIV/AIDS began to spread through the Pacific region, Oxfam New Zealand offered funding and eight months later, the first episode of the radio soap, *Famili Blong Serah* ( Sarah's family) was broadcast.

3 Te Rakau theatre company presented *The Battalion* at the Festival with the support of a grant of \$42,000 from Creative New Zealand (Creative New Zealand Grants February–May 2009 Arts Grants contestable funding round.)

4 Programme for the Wan Smolbag International Theatre Festival 2009  
<http://www.wansmolbag.org/admin/download/FestivalProg.pdf>

5 Commonwealth of Learning (COL) provides a wealth of services and collaborative opportunities for policy makers, institutions and distance education practitioners to encourage the development of, and help enhance, the use of open and distance learning (ODL) policies, systems and applications. <http://www.col.org/progServ/Pages/default.aspx>

6 Oxfam New Zealand has funded a number of projects including the long running radio serial *Famili Blong Serah* ( Sarah's family)  
<http://www.oxfam.org.nz/index.asp?s1=What%20we%20do&s2=Where%20we%20work&s3=Pacific&s4=Vanuatu&s5=Wan%20Smolbag>

7 *Love Patrol* has been screened on Maori Television together with other films made by Wan Smolbag. Susan Battye of Drama Magic Ltd first approached Maori Television on behalf of Wan Smolbag in 2006 to promote screenings of Wan Smolbag films such as *A Piece of Land*, *Eniwan I Luk Rose*, and *Vanua Tai – Of Land and Sea*. Wan Smolbag has produced an excellent teaching resource to accompany Series 1 of *Love Patrol*. *Love Patrol* is set in a local village police station deals with issues such as being HIV positive and infidelity.  
<http://www.wansmolbag.org/admin/download/LovePatrol1CGuide.pdf>

8 A partnership between Otago University and Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) has opened the door for young New Zealanders to work in sustainable development in some of the world's poorest countries. <http://www.vsa.org.nz/news/specialevents/news1164750476.html>

9 *Long 1 Step Wan*, Wan Smolbag 2008. Recorded at the Haulau Youth Centre, Loltong Village, Pentecost, Vanuatu.

10 Andrew Meakes

11 Approximately NZD \$120,000

12 Student Centred Teaching in the South Pacific: A Review of the Work of Wan Smolbag Theatre, Final Report Prepared by David Small for NZAID, July 2007.

## **Biography**



Susan Battye