

Tikanga Frameworks and the Learning Environment at Toi Whakaari

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Abstract

This paper examines the effect of *tikanga* frameworks in training for a career in theatre and screen. It examines the way in which Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School seeks to blend together the best of contemporary performing arts practice while innovating out of the indigenous wisdom of this country that holds so much knowledge and clarity about the development of working community cultures. In particular, it looks at the journey to employ these structures at Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School and the way in which they are affecting the work of the school, including its performative work.

Introduction

The whakapapa of Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School dates back to the beginning of a professional performing arts industry in this country. We have grown hand in hand with the industry. Our graduates now occupy key roles in all sectors of the industry and related fields. For nearly thirty years the School has been wrestling with the idea that including practices indigenous to New Zealand in the training of theatre and screen professionals will lead to artists whose work reflects the country in a living and embodied way, that they will be stronger in their artform and make a greater contribution to the worlds of theatre and screen coming from such a base.



Photographer: Philip Merry Graduation 2010

The struggle from my perspective, as Director of the School, has been finding out how to do this effectively, so that any sense of tokenism is eschewed. This has been and continues to be a challenge. The struggle reflects the wider society of New Zealand and the efforts since the mid 1980's to address cultural inequities and the injustices of the past. For the past fourteen years I have been the Director of the School, and Head of Actor Training for the six years prior to that, so my own practice is deeply grounded in the questions raised through taking this approach.

Background

From the mid 1980s the New Zealand government required organizations to take a number of steps to include things Māori, in their names and in their processes. For many, this has been a superficial process that has had no systemic relationship to the work of the organisation. But at Toi Whakaari the effort to integrate a Māori perspective in the work has been a sincere one and has profoundly influenced the school and the training it delivers. In 1998 I delivered a paper at the Concepts Conference London. wrote:

The commitment to reflect a bi-cultural world is also reflected in the curriculum. *Taha Māori* (things Māori) is a core subject; at least one production a year has Māori content; elements of Māori culture are integrated into other core curriculum areas. *Karanga* (call) is part of the voice programme. *Waiata* (Māori songs) are part of the singing programme, *taiaha* (Māori martial art using a stave-like weapon) has replaced fencing as the core weapons training and *haka* (fierce dance) and *waiata-a-ringa*

(movement & song) are a part of the movement programme. This has had a clear follow-on in the wider theatre world where graduates of the School have been major players in the development of a theatre form with an infrastructure that draws on the traditional Māori forum of the *Marae*.

Achieving this integration within a theatre and screen education is a complex and challenging proposition and the School struggled and occasionally floundered in its attempts to find an appropriate way to implement *tikanga* (Māori protocol and values) into the curriculum. By engaging with this question the School placed itself in a contested and uncertain place. Alison Richards (2006) comments that in taking this path the School 'must be prepared to invite the participation (and to come under scrutiny) of Māori cultural activists, insofar as it offers itself as a strategic ground upon which the potential course of cultural revival can be explored in its interaction with the Pākehā community' and indeed that has been and continues to be the case.

However, the success of graduates such as Nancy Brunning, Cliff Curtis, Robyn Malcolm and Willem Wassenar in the New Zealand theatre and screen industries and comments from national and international guests have re-enforced the value of the experiment and its reflection in the strength of the work at the School. The focus and the difficulty was to integrate this work fully into the business of preparing actors, directors, technicians etc into the theatre and film professions in such a way as to ground them in the practices indigenous to the country, to grow our awareness of what is *tika* (what feels right) in each occasion.

Marae Rituals, particularly pāwhiri, at Toi Whakaari

Marae rituals have had a significant effect on theatrical performance within the New Zealand context and within my own practice. The *marae*, in Māori culture, is a space (among other things) for formal encounters, particularly moments when one group meets another. These gatherings are known as *hui*. Every encounter begins with a *pāwhiri*, a formal welcome which takes place as soon as the visiting group arrives. This is followed by the discussions and events, varying enormously from occasion to occasion, organised around the purpose for which the *hui* has been

called. At the end of the *hui* a formal farewell completes the event, a *poroporoakā*, which includes instructions given to those departing. Christian Penny, Associate Director of Toi Whakaari, notes that ‘on the *marae* you are always doing something in service for something – in theatre that’s hard to arrive at’ (2010), and it is this sense of acting towards a common purpose that makes *marae* rituals so useful in developing frameworks for theatre practice. These rituals contain performative elements, but always in the context of the purpose and desired efficacy for which they are being held. The content is shaped by the structure but is created within the moment. Everyone is a participant. They are all, as Boal would say ‘spect-actors’ participating actively, often unpredictably within the framework of the event. (Boal, 1985)

Toi Whakaari has been welcoming guests into the School through a *pāwhiri* through the past twenty years. As the School has worked to deepen the understanding of the underlying values in *pāwhiri*, these ‘welcomes’ have become stronger in their focus on function rather than performance. This in turn has led to a deepening in the confidence of students and staff to take up the roles required, to speak from that sense of purpose and to listen and improvise accordingly. *Pāwhiri* create a space within which students can greet their guests as fellow practitioners and human beings, however exalted. And this in turn opens up a true possibility of exchange. It is clear that international visitors to the School see the *ihi* (vitality, quality of excellence) evoked by the ceremony, the sense of potent and unencumbered presence in the participants and instinctively relate that to theatre. They respond to the sense of an encounter that takes place on both the physical and the metaphorical levels.



Photographer: Bette Cosgrove Song 'Ngoi' as part of pĀwhiri 2010

At the Asia-Pacific Conference of UNESCO International Theatre Institute of Theatre School Directors 2009, Richard Schechner spoke of the necessity to train practitioners using what he called the 'local local' – the practices of the place, and this chimed with the thinking developing at Toi Whakaari. Schechner said:

Our work ought to be about where cultures do not fit together, where there is conflict, misunderstanding, drama. Our mission needs to be cooperation and collaboration within contexts where that is difficult, where that is the juice. Rituals are beliefs enacted and in the ritual aesthetic the form is inflamed by entanglement, by debate and exchange. Schools are sited mostly in large cosmopolitan cities, but there are also real, local areas in these lands. How does our work preserve or destroy the local?

At the School the journey has been to see how difference can be encountered, the discomfort of misunderstanding and disagreement held, so that a genuine meeting is possible. In all of this the aim has been to develop practitioners who are grounded in the particular and robust in the face of difference. As Christian Penny says, they are developing the ability to endure the 'vulnerability of truly encountering another perspective' and to be active in the face of that difference, searching for the specific, the *tika*, the 'in the moment' response.' (Penny, 2010)

Tikanga Frameworks

More recently, the school has worked to centralise the imaginative use of frameworks from *Te Ao Māori* by focusing on the underlying values. The transformation into a more articulate and applied practice has largely been the work of two young teachers Teina Moetara and Jade Eriksen, appointed to the staff in 2008. Nor is it a practice that is complete. It is in a process of continuing discovery: research, application, return to thinking and redevelopment of models, application etc. reflecting the discourse in which the entire country is engaged. It is important to note that these influential staff are a Pākehā woman and a Māori man. Both

have grown up in the same part of New Zealand and had a profound respect for each other, and for the questions around working through Māori frameworks.



Photographer: Philip Merry 2008. Eriksen and Moetara

Christian Penny, in a paper to UNESCO ITI earlier this year describes the impact of their dual presence, grappling with these questions:

As they started to work with these questions together – their very strength and the integrity of their relationship provided a provocative model to staff and students alike – even if we couldn't understand or articulate the why and the how – the truth and freshness of this relationship in our country asked us all to at least consider more thoughtfully this area of school life.... They wanted the students to understand the principles of what they were involved in through Māori process and how this related to making them better artists. They began examining what is the strength of Māori culture that could be of use to training in the theatre. (Penny, 2010)

Moetara and Eriksen began to develop ways in which the School community could take the frameworks of the *marae* and apply these to the work of theatre and of training, embedding the thinking so that the work could emerge organically. In other words, they moved away from skills teaching (though this remains an element of the training) into the fundamental structures that frame the skills. A primary vehicle for developing this community approach is *koiwi*, (literally translated as 'bones'), twice-weekly meetings where the school (staff and students) gathers to learn and practice together. As the absorption of the framework or structures deepens, the ability to

freely improvise within them grows. It is a piece of longitudinal performance research that attends to the manner and underlying quality of actions, and the courage to act arising out of an awareness of patterns.

Karakia as a teaching framework

As part of this research, Moetara wrote a *karakia* (invocation) for the School, especially tailored to the needs of people training in performing arts. Like so many Māori frameworks, this *karakia* is multi-layered. On one level it can be said to initiate a piece of work, or be used at the beginning of a *pāwhiri*. On another layer it contains a set of principles that can be applied to any event, class or production in order to clarify and refine the purpose and therefore the effective delivery of the event. The frameworks are embedded in the curriculum documents, reflecting the way in which this thinking is embedded (or in the continuing process of being embedded) across the school.

The text of the *karakia* is as follows:

'Kia karanga ake ki te taumata i te maurea

Ko te poutokomanawa o taku tu, ko te aroha.

Kia whai te aroaro ki a Hinetitama

Kia rongo ake i te tangi o te keo

Kia rauika te kawa ki nga pakitara o Te Whaea

Te Kura Toi Whakaari!

Tuturu whakamaua kia tina!

Tina! Haumi e...hui e...Taiki e!

(Bring us closer to our indefinable potential

An expression of love which is core to my stance

With care, consideration and respect I tread this pathway of enlightenment

To hear the cry of the eagle from the vales of Tangi-te-Keo

To be nurtured by the ways of the mother Te Whaea

We are Toi Whakaari!

Be true to this, hold fast! Indeed!

Indeed! We take hold)

(Moetara, 2008)

The *karakia* begins before a word is spoken, with the *matataki*, the stance of those about to speak. This is both the literal stance, open, prepared, energised, but also carries the sense of the individuals within the group, representing all the people and places that have formed them and which now support them, and the collective work and aspirations of the group. It focuses the group, not on their individual performances, but on the people for whom they are standing, severally and collectively and orientates them towards purpose rather than performance. This is a profound a shift for the performer. It lifts a kind of performance anxiety from the shoulders of the actors and allows them to contextualise their work, with the audience being the final and vital part of that context. Purpose frees them from self-consciousness. Jane Boston, British voice teacher and author, commented when being welcomed by a group of students trained in this ethos that she had never experienced singing with such clarity of purpose; purpose which freed the singers from self-consciousness or a focus on perfecting performance and instead linked them to the grace of action and encounter. (Boston, 2009) Moetara supported her perception: 'When you listen in a particular way to the needs of the group you understand you can affect that with your role, that role has *mana*, so you perform with more of yourself, you stand with strength....' In this context, purpose allows

improvisation because security in purpose frees you to read the encounter without fear and to respond within the moment.

The first line of the *karakia*, for example, acknowledges the spirit and passion, the goals of those present, in Maori terms, their *wairua* (spirit), linking it to the *karanga* with which the women call the *manuhiri* (visitors) onto the marae. *Wairua* invokes a way of travelling forward, linking the spirits of all present. And because it connects to the *karanga* it invokes too the past and the future, weaving them with this particular moment in time. This sense of a threshold is strong. We are reminded that a true encounter creates a liminal space where one moves from one state to another. Anne Bogart writes, 'A liminal space is a state in between, or a transition between different states...Like the space of a doorway between rooms, it lacks concrete definition because even though it conveys something from its previous stage, it has not yet become the new one. In ritual, religion, and theatre, it is a space in between where symbolic acts are played out'. (Bogart, 2007) Reminding us of the moment of *karanga* embodies this sense of a call backwards and forwards in time and the many dimensions of such a call. It evokes the visceral sound of that call and brings the entire person into play – not just the logical left brain, but the right brain perceptions of linkages and oneness. The application of these frameworks remains a work in progress, but one at which the School grows ever stronger. David Carnegie, writing in 1985, predicted 'a quite profound change in the dynamics of theatrical performance' as a result of these Māori rituals appearing in theatre. Perhaps that change has taken another step towards its realisation through the work coming out of Toi Whakaari, spear-headed by these two young practitioners, Moetara and Eriksen.

Marae Noho

To deepen and contextualise this engagement with *tikanga* frameworks, Toi Whakaari annually takes its students to live and work on a *marae*. In the 1990s and early twenty-first century this was a fairly limited experience, confined to the first year of students across all the courses. As of 2010 this visit includes all students and staff and takes place over several days during which the process of learning within the

specific disciplines of the School continues, but now in a Māori context. Penny described the impact and the School's continuing struggle to articulate this impact:

... when I arrived at the school nearly nine years ago now, this exercise lasted one night and essentially involved some staff and the first year students getting a taste of indigenous culture. Its effect was piecemeal to say the least. We have been developing this part of our programme however and this year, we took the whole school, 170 students, staff and families to live together for one week on a marae.... Over this week we ran the school from this place and were involved in a series of exchanges with the local community – including shows, classes and workshops.... In the Māori world view – like in the performing and screen arts– the work of the community works best– *if* all folk know and observe their roles – but also are able to act *independently* to see what is needed at any given point... This became the culmination of a thematic for Term One: *Tāwharanga*, translated as standing place or role – the goal of the school's context and practice in Term One is for all students to assess, adapt to and begin to enact their learning, in ways that are appropriate to their current standing in the School. The *noho marae* is an opportunity to test and practice our skills off-site in a foreign context but aided by the fact that we are together. In such an intense way. If we do this well we have laid down a key pathway for ourselves in preparation for working on productions in the coming terms. (Penny, 2010)



Photographer: Annie Ruth Manutuke 2009 and 2010.

Part of the practice included hard skills such as bird movements and *mau rakau* (staves) work, with the students and staff learning together across the years as in the photo. The *mau rakau* movement patterns required them to work as a cohesive unit. And it enabled all of the School community to become learners together, with staff working alongside students as equals. In focusing on function and purpose the aim was to enable both cast and crew, in their future production work, to feel empowered to keep watching, listening and offering, just as they did within the *marae* community, to assess according to what is needed and respond. This invokes an 'aliveness' to situation and a freedom to remain open and responsive within the moment. The community experience of the *marae* was thus available to be translated directly into performance work.

From training into performance: three productions at Toi Whakaari

Pakiwaitara

Moetara has taken the guiding principle of working through the structure of a *pāwhiri* into theatrical performances he has co-directed at Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School. In 2008 *Pakiwaitara* (translated by Moetara as 'stories run down the walls like water') was performed at the Museum of Wellington: City and Sea, which used to be the headquarters of the Harbour Board for the Port of Wellington. The work was built from an investigation into the stories represented within the Museum, from immigration and the treatment of Pacific Island immigrants to the sinking of the *Wahine* in 1968. The rehearsal process was guided by *marae* protocols with a strong emphasis on sense of role and purpose:

Going in to mine people's histories and stories, we had a task to uphold the *mana* of these people, we had a job to do, not to just show off ourselves. So I used *marae* structure to hold the importance of that. For example we did *karakia* before entering the space, and not just Māori *karakia*, but everyone offered something that ... put them in a position to enter. And that way we could work with those histories and stories. (Moetara, 2009)



Photographer: Philip Merry 2008

Pakiwaitara was built through a series of improvisations exploring the spaces of the museum. It was a promenade piece, beginning outside the building and traversing a series of rooms – the old Board Room, the stairway, the *Wahine* Room and the art gallery. The stories ranged through the hundred and fifty years of the building's history. They were built out of improvisations and carried an element of improvisation in performance, following the ritual of a *pāwhiri*. Christopher Balme speaks of Māori theatre as 'less the creation of a new kind of dramatic writing than a new kind of perceptual frame' and it is this re-framing that was visible here. The *marae* is a framework that invokes a world of participation, a world where encounters are negotiated, one that moves the theatre audience from observers to participants. In the images above the cast are calling the audience into the space. The *waiata* they are singing contained elements of the *karanga*, adapted and focused on the situation and place of the performance.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

The framework of the *marae* was also applied to the 2009 graduation production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by Māori director and Associate Director of Toi Whakaari, Christian Penny. Brecht's play has of course, no intrinsic relationship to *tikanga marae*, but using this framework enabled the cast to hold a stance in

relationship to the audience that was both strong and fluid, growing out of a sense of shared purpose and a willingness to let the audience contribute to that. Brecht's play is built around a question of ownership: Who owns a child? The person who gave birth to it or the person who cares for it? In this production the child was played by a different young person every night, pre-selected but with no knowledge of the plot. This child watched the first half of the play with the audience, cared for by a designated cast member. The audience were asked to take care of the child and to watch over him/her. In the second half the child stayed outside with Grusha (the child's adoptive mother) until the moment when the child is brought forward for the question of the rightful mother to be settled. So every night that child was improvising, genuinely reacting to the work as it developed and the cast too were responding according to the child's reactions. As were the audience, for we had been explicitly tasked to take on the role of protectors towards this child, making us hyper-aware of her/his every reaction and movement.



Photographer: Philip Merry 2009 . The image is from the first Act. Grusha is giving the child sitting with the audience the 'baby' embodiment of herself to hold.

The joint ownership underpinning the work reflected the sense of roles developed on the *marae*. The resulting work had a particular quality of ownership rarely seen in the theatre, which translated into a sense of acute listening that was both playful and 'dangerous' in that one didn't know what might happen next. The director, Christian Penny, encouraged the cast and crew to keep listening and to respond and adapt to the audience and each other, so that not only were no two performances the same, but even the same performance was different depending on the choices you made as an audience member, choices about where to sit, when to move, when to change

seats. And of course, the reaction of the child and her/his individual qualities differed markedly from performance to performance.

Cast member Sophie Lindsay reflecting months later wrote:

The discussions we have at the dinner table still include reflections and thoughts about the past few weeks at Toi, notably the success of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and the Graduation Ceremony. For me, they both showed the potency of what can happen when theatre-makers work together, when we focus on a common purpose and when we enter into a contract of keeping to this purpose. Theatre is *tāngata*, people and community. (Lindsay, 2009)

Marat/Sade

My 2010 production of *Marat/Sade* presented an opportunity to explore both Viewpoints-based choreography (another methodology taught at Toi Whakaari) and frameworks from *tikanga marae* in tandem. The language of *tikanga* was already strong within the ensemble from the work in *koiwi*. In approaching this work I applied the *karakia* written by Teina Moetara. Anne Bogart writes of the creative effect of paying attention: 'Listening is a creative act, and it can be an act of love. To pay attention changes us and changes the object of our attention.' (Bogart, 2007) In working on this *Marat/Sade* I set out to pay attention, fiercely and consistently, using the frameworks articulated through *tikanga* to assist me to truly 'see'.

Whenever we hit difficulties, we came back to *tikanga*. We found the concept of *matataki* (stance) particularly valuable. The play is set in an insane asylum but we had chosen to work with people suffering neurological rather than psychological problems. There was a strong desire to be eloquent about these conditions through the actors' bodies, to shine some light on this sector of our communities even as we engaged in the major philosophical arguments of the play.

We took the concept of *karanga* and used it to assist us in the way we brought the audience into the space, eventually choosing to call them in with a ringing bell. All

the cast greeted the incoming audience and saw them settled into their places, forming the function of *whakatau* (to settle, make comfortable) which you hear at the end of the *karanga*, opening up the warmth of human relationships. It is deeply connected to *aroha* (love), opening up the possibilities of human relationships. The focus values encounter rather than performance. Declan Donnellan notes that ‘...one of the curses of life is that we are often caught up in a performance....when we see reality more clearly we can ‘perform’ less’. (Donnellan, 2009) The first line in the *karakia* reminds us to ‘see’ what and who are before us, encourages us to ‘be’ rather than ‘perform’ ourselves. The individual encounters with audience members in the performances of *Marat/Sade* were necessarily improvised and differed considerably from night to night, informing the reception of the work that followed.

None of this would have been visible to the audience as coming from *tikanga Māori*. We did not use *tikanga* to give a flavour or cultural context to the work but to assist us in our encounter with the text, particularly by framing the rehearsal process on the basis of inclusivity so that cast and crew worked seamlessly together, and by giving us a framework within which to problem-solve and test out the functionality and appropriateness of decisions in rehearsal. The ending of *Marat/Sade* is a challenge. In the Peter Brook production (1967) the play ends with the patients rioting, raping the wife and daughter of the prison governor and being beaten back by the staff. Three times we stopped rehearsals to hold a *hui* to discuss how the ending of our production might reflect the values we were exploring through the text. This focus on purpose brought us finally to an ending in which our *matataki* was clear, one that honoured both our own work and the play. Instead of the patients transgressing, it was the representative of normality and authority, the Mayor who did the unthinkable. She had been carried aloft on the patients’ shoulders and then thrown in the bath vacated by Marat. The patient playing Duperret, whom we had seen in the course of the play as challenged by abnormally strong sex urges, rushed forward to assist her and she, mistaking his intentions, kicked him. The patient fell, hitting his head on the bath as he did so, and finally lying unconscious at her feet. The Mayor had publicly attacked and injured a neurological patient. In her actions we hoped we could all see our own fears and prejudices at work.



Photographer: Stephen A'Court 2010

Conclusion

Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School has been conducting longitudinal research into ways of innovating out of the indigenous wisdoms of our country. Doing this effectively is complex and challenging and the School has not always succeeded in making this a meaningful process. In the past five years, largely through the work of staff members Teina Moetara and Jade Eriksen, the focus has moved to innovating out of the underlying values of *tikanga Māori* rather than on the performative skills of *kapa haka* (though these remain a part of the School curriculum). This has led to a deeper understanding of purpose and role in performative and ritual situations, replacing a focus on performance with one on encounter and connection. At the time of writing the entire School, staff and students, are committing to exploring how these wisdoms allow theatre and screen practitioners to utilise the best of contemporary practice strengthened by a sense of identity and place. We seek to develop practitioners who are grounded in the particular and robust in the face of difference, able to endure the vulnerability of truly encountering another perspective.

Considering our work through the lens of *tikanga* frameworks, in particular through the School's *karakia*, is becoming deeply embedded in the training offered at Toi Whakaari, to our degree documentation and to our developing practice. Anne Bogart

writes, 'shared actions in small rooms can resonate throughout an entire culture'. (Bogart, 2007) The values encapsulated in the *karakia* are a potent reminder of those resonances and of the vitality that we are striving to achieve in these first, often stumbling attempts at employing *tikanga marae* as a learning methodology.

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Biography



Photographer: Philip Merry

Annie Ruth MNZM

Annie was Director of Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School from 1997 till May 2011. She is also a professional director and actor. Her solo show *Dissident Voices*, was performed at Bats Theatre, Wellington and in Italy and the USA. Annie's areas of specialist experience are Improvisation and 'Viewpoints' acting methodology, having worked with Keith Johnstone, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, as well as with international practitioners at *LaMaMa*, Italy. This experience forms the basis for her current PhD research. She has taught in top schools and international Masterclasses in Europe and USA. In 2009 Annie worked for UNESCO International Theatre Institute in Romania and Germany, devised a work, *Tapu Toru*, to take to the Shanghai UNESCO ITI Festival and was funded by CNZ to do an exploratory workshop that included the dancer and choreographer, Michael Parmenter. Annie teaches acting, improvisation and directing at Toi Whakaari. In 2010 she directed *Marat/Sade* for Toi Whakaari. In 2011 she gave a paper on pedagogy and taught a masterclass at the Delhi UNESCO ITI Festival.