

## Writing Drama Today

Vivienne Plumb

Kia ora. Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

I was originally born in Sydney, Australia, but because my mother was a New Zealander I travelled to N.Z. in 1974 to visit my relatives, and have lived there ever since.

When I first arrived in New Zealand the theatre on offer was predominantly plays from the United Kingdom and occasionally some American pieces. But during the 1980's there was a great push to begin to present more plays written by New Zealanders. At first audiences felt unsure and shy about seeing themselves portrayed there on stage, but New Zealand work is now immensely popular. New Zealand theatre has now come of age.

Theatre has become an important medium to discuss topical issues - some of the work being presented right now could hardly be produced anywhere else because these pieces are about such particular themes. An example is the new play, *The Bach*, commissioned for the Auckland Theatre Company and written by Stephen Sinclair. (By the way a 'bach' is the N.Z. word for a small holiday place.) One of the main themes of this dramatic piece is the Maori/Pakeha 'Foreshore and Seabed' argument, at the forefront of issues in N.Z. right now. (By the way 'pakeha' is the accepted term in N.Z. for 'European' people.)

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between the government and the various Maori tribes of N.Z. Over the last ten to fifteen years there have been many land and monetary settlements made through this Treaty to different Maori tribes to make restitution for land that was taken illegally by the Crown, but last year a new claim was made by a South Island Maori tribe. They claim that they also own the foreshore and the seabed around their (coastal) tribal land area.

Many other tribes quickly followed suite, putting in the same claim through the courts. The N.Z. prime minister, Helen Clark, says that the foreshore and the seabed are public property, but an enormous legal debate has begun. Just before I left the country to come to the United States there was a gigantic hikoi (or march) to Parliament, from Maori who had travelled from all parts of the country to express to Parliament how they felt.

This is the major theme of Stephen's play *The Bach*. You can see from my description of the play that it is not something that could be produced easily anywhere else as this theme may not mean anything to other nationalities, on the other hand in the particular there always lies the universal.

The U.K. theatre critic, Michael Billington, said when visiting N.Z. recently, that he thought much of our theatre had become a way for us to re-address and examine the mistakes of our colonial past.

At the moment in N.Z. we are in the middle of a Maori renaissance. The Maori language almost disappeared earlier last century. If children spoke it at school they were smacked and beaten. It was discouraged. But the language - the 'te reo', a national 'taonga' or treasure - has been saved. Many primary school children are now learning Maori in their schools, we have Maori Language Week, and we have a new Maori television channel which began screening in March of this year.

The te reo has invaded our own N.Z. English language. Many Maori words are now in common use in N.Z.– words such as ‘hikoi’ ( a march) ‘korero’ (a talk) hui (‘a get together’), and ‘raruraru’ (a problem). There are Maori Members of Parliament, a Maori political party, Maori poets and writers (Witi Ihimarea wrote the story *Whale Rider*), and some very good Maori playwrights.

This must be the biggest change in drama today in N.Z. We have a Maori voice, which draws on its own mythology and culture. But at the same time there are so many Polynesians living in Auckland (our business centre) it has become the largest Polynesian city in the world – there are Samoans, Tongans, Fijians, Niue Islanders, Tuvalu Islanders and Cook Islanders. So we also have a Polynesian voice emerging in theatre. And these cultures also have their own oral traditions and songs and myths and dances.

For the eight months to September the three most popular plays this year at the Auckland Theatre Company have been three N.Z. pieces – Stephen Sinclair’s *The Bach* and Peter Hawes’ play, *Goldie*, which is about the life of Goldie, the artist, who painted many Maori during the 1800’s, as he thought he was painting a dying race, and *Spreading Out*, a comedy by Roger Hall about becoming old in N.Z.

So New Zealand has truly come of age – it is now a country that enjoys laughing at itself on stage, and enjoys listening about itself.

My own involvement in writing for the theatre came about as I originally trained as an actor, but I also write poetry and prose. While I am in Iowa City I am working on a novel. I began writing about ten years ago.

I am a founding member of the Women’s Play Press, a publishing collective that was formed to promote and publish more scripts by women, and has now published thirteen scripts since it was formed in 1992. Last year I edited an anthology of short theatre pieces which was published through The Women’s Play Press and publication was funded by the Wellington City Council.

I am also the vice-president of The N.Z. Poetry Society, and a member of the N.Z. Society of Authors, and of The Sargeson Trust, a trust which administers two writing fellowships a year that are in the name of Frank Sargeson, a famous N.Z. short story writer.