

Lodestone or Leadweight: How Shakespeare 'Means' at the New Zealand International Arts Festival

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Shakespeare's plays served many generations of Pākehā colonists as a cultural compass, orienting them to their symbolic and geographical "North": Britain. But how will Shakespeare serve contemporary Aotearoans – Pākehā, Māori, and otherwise – as they navigate the 21st century? Shakespeare remains New Zealand's most performed playwright, and the only one with festivals dedicated to producing his work. But Britain's magnetic pull is not what it once was, and Shakespeare now polarises in a different sense, as became apparent in recent debates over whether his role in the secondary school curriculum should be diminished or eliminated. Will New Zealanders come to view Shakespeare as a relic of the colonial past, or claim him as an integral part of their "own" culture? Will they continue to look overseas for examples of "authentic" Shakespeare, or chart their own course? And in defining their relationship to Shakespeare, how will they redefine themselves?

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Shakespeare's plays served early Pākehā colonists as a cultural compass, orienting them to their symbolic and geographical "North." But even though Shakespeare remains New Zealand's most performed playwright, Britain's magnetic pull is not what it once was, and Shakespeare now polarises in a different sense, as became apparent in recent debates over whether his role in the secondary school curriculum should be diminished or eliminated.¹ How will Shakespeare serve contemporary Aotearoans—Pākehā, Māori, and otherwise—as they navigate the 21st century? Although there is no simple answer to this question, the reception of Shakespeare at the 2012 New Zealand International Arts Festival some offers important insights into how Shakespeare functions as a signifier in contemporary New Zealand—at least in the context of a prestigious international arts festival, which is admittedly quite different from how he might signify in high school courses or in advertising. In this paper I analyse these responses, in the context of my own observations of each play, and through the lens of Ric Knowles's *Reading the Material Theatre*, in order to ask whether and to what extent spectators and critics at the 2012 NZIAF were guided by traditional conceptions of Shakespeare as a cultural compass point.

There were five productions or explicit adaptations of Shakespeare at the 2012 NZIAF in Wellington.² Three were well-oiled international touring productions: Propeller, a renowned all-male company from England, brought its productions of *Henry V* and *The Winter's Tale*; and Pan Pan, an Irish company, performed *The Rehearsal*, *Playing the Dane*, which it has been touring around the world since 2010. The other two were local, and both received their world premieres at the festival: Michael Hurst, a New Zealand actor well-known for roles in *Hercules* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, among other things, performed all the roles in *Frequently Asked Questions: To Be or Not to Be etc.*, a solo show co-written by himself, Natalie Medlock, and Dan Musgrove; and Ngakau Toa presented *The Māori Troilus and Cressida—Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira*, new translation by Te Haumihia Mason, which went on to represent New Zealand in the *Globe to Globe Festival at the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad*. This blend of touring and local, "straight" and adapted, Pakeha and Māori Shakespeares

constituted an intriguing constellation of Shakespearean performances, which provoked a broad range of responses.

The Festival offers a unique opportunity to explore how 'Shakespeare' means in contemporary New Zealand/Aotearoa theatre, by examining the productions themselves and the conditions of production and reception, including the festival's physical and cultural presence in Wellington and its public discourse. As I will demonstrate, the 'meaning' of a play, and in this case of Shakespeare, is not embedded in the play, as many spectators assume, but shaped, if not determined, by seemingly extrinsic factors, such as ticket prices, publicity and marketing discourse, and the politics of location, including where (and when) a production is construed as 'coming from.' I am particularly interested in showing how critics and audiences construct and respond to 'Shakespeare' at the 2012 NZIAF, and by examining the reception of these plays I hope to identify some of the cultural and material factors that determine what and how Shakespeare means in contemporary New Zealand, factors which I read largely as an outsider, having arrived in Wellington in January 2011.

Reading the Material Festival

In *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles points out that traditional analyses of theatre and drama tend to focus on and privilege what is on the page or the stage, assuming that "theatrical scripts and productions 'have' universal meaning," and that they simply transmit this meaning—which is usually assumed to communicate the "determinable intentions of playwrights, directors, and other artists"—with greater or lesser clarity across the footlights to anyone, anywhere, who cares to receive them."³ There are many problems with this model, one of which is that it fails to explain why the same production elicits a different reception in different places, such as Pan Pan's *The Rehearsal*, which provoked different responses in Wellington than in Australia, America, and Ireland. As Knowles argues, 'meaning' in theatre is not stored in a text and transmitted to the audience; it is created by and through a performance, and shaped by the material and ideological conditions of production and reception. Factors such as high or low ticket prices, theatres that are more or less 'classy' or centrally located, and performers and plays of a particular cultural pedigree, select a spectatorship that is more or less open to culturally affirmative or oppositional readings; public discourse—including marketing and publicity materials, media coverage, reviews, program notes, posters, and advertising imagery—actively seeks to influence the horizon of expectations; and training and traditions, labour practices, rehearsal process, and working conditions all shape the meaning of a play.⁴ My analysis of how Shakespeare means at the 2012 NZIAF therefore begins by highlighting the material conditions of production and reception at the festival, even though—or precisely because—many spectators might not notice them or consider them relevant to the meaning of the plays.⁵

The Festival: History, Context, Public Discourse, and Venues

The NZIAF, a biennial festival launched in 1986, claims to be "New Zealand's premier cultural event drawing together diverse art forms, artists and cultures to enchant, challenge and inspire the hearts and minds of audiences of all ages and backgrounds."⁶ In addition to theatre, the Festival programs dance, music, visual arts, and literary events (and many productions which might fall into more than one category). Although it focuses on bringing international shows to New Zealand, the Festival also commissions and programs new works by New Zealand artists, including *The Māori Troilus and Cressida*.

While the 2012 Festival line-up featured remarkable cultural diversity, its claim to reach audiences of all ages and backgrounds must be qualified by certain material and social factors. As the national capital and the home of two universities, Wellington has New Zealand's highest median income, its most educated population, and

a high proportion of foreign-born residents. While numerous citizens no doubt make the trip to see Festival shows from other areas of the country, the majority of the Festival's theatre spectators come from within Wellington's cultural bubble, and the high ticket prices favour mature, urban professionals.⁷ Ticket prices between \$45 and \$90 put the Festival out of reach of most young adults, even though I saw many young spectators out with their parents, and the Propeller Shakespeare plays attracted large contingents of high school students. Virtually none of my students at Victoria University's theatre program, who make up a significant proportion of the city's most active theatre artists, could afford to attend the Festival. So although the Festival is *marketed* to all New Zealanders through a prominent advertising campaign comprising print and online marketing materials ranging from handbills to billboards, its shows are not actually available to all New Zealanders (although a limited number of \$20 rush tickets are made available on a daily basis). As Knowles argues, "international festivals are first and foremost marketplaces" which function "as manifestations of a theatrical version of late-capitalist globalization, post-modern marketplaces for the exchange, not so much of culture as of cultural *capital*".⁸ The art presented at such festivals serves as the object of exchange, and as a vehicle for the display of corporate logos, which accrue cultural capital for their brands by being attached to art. The NZIAF's public discourse and imagery is loaded with signifiers of cultural prestige: its posters and ads feature staged images of conventionally beautiful, performing artists looking serious, accompanied by the simple tag-line "Extraordinary," blazoned in an elegant font. The program and posters also make corporate logos prominent, and contain long lists of donors and sponsors, ranked in order of their philanthropic magnanimity (Gold Partners, Core Funders, etc.). The Festival publicity material also works to bind together its diverse programming by creating a sense of visual unity. The Festival's distinctive visual branding links together performances which span numerous disciplines and genres, and occupy a variety of venues throughout Wellington.

Both the high culture signifiers and visual branding directly influence how Shakespeare means. First, they establish a certain high cultural gravitas. As such, spectators will view interpretations of Shakespeare differently than they might in a production at the (concurrent) Wellington Fringe Festival, where one expects risqué or off-beat treatment of the classics. In addition, this cultural capital is available for appropriation by audiences and especially theatre critics, who position themselves as the expert interpreters of high culture. Second, the publicity materials efface significant aesthetic, economic, and political differences between the high culture, high budget shows from Europe and the much more modestly budgeted local productions. The 2012 Festival's publicity created a visual homogeneity that obscured the productions' distinct aesthetic approaches, production values, and target audiences. For example, the imagery and text of the Festival publicity materials make *The Rehearsal* and *Frequently Asked Questions* appear much more similar than they really were. It describes *The Rehearsal* as a "highly innovative, witty and engaging [...] riff on *Hamlet* that does not so much update or deconstruct the play as explode it";⁹ this blurb accompanies a photo of a sombre-looking schoolboy, holding an enormous Great Dane on a leash. The boy wears a uniform, the dog a comically large (ahem) ruff, and both are dramatically top-lit so that the right sides of their faces are in shadows, against a deep purple background. The *FAQ* publicity material shows "celebrated actor Michael Hurst," lit to similar dramatic effect with the left side of his face in shadow, holding an animal's skull, which (like Hurst) gazes out of the frame toward the viewer, slightly above the lens of the camera. It describes the show as "an innovative solo work set in the Shakespearean afterlife," in which "an insomniac called Hamlet discovers a script documenting the end of his life".¹⁰ In spite of the implied similarities, *The Rehearsal* is exactly the sort of high-art, post-modern melange of Shakespeare, Beckett, and Great Danes that the publicity materials suggest, whereas *FAQ* is most generously described as a farcical one-man romp, in which Hurst performs goofy send-ups of his favourite Shakespearean characters, including Hamlet wearing a ridiculous Prince Valiant wig, a Macbeth based on Groundskeeper Willie, and an Othello who sounded like the descendant of Austrians long ago marooned on a Caribbean island. The aesthetic unity projected by the publicity material makes it possible to view all these shows through the same lens, without which they would appear to have little in common.

The Shows

To Be, or Not to Be Hamlet?: *The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane*

Although a touring production, Pan Pan's *The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane* actually blends the global and the local: in each new site it recruits local talent to round out its roster of Irish actors. The roles cast in each city include an academic, played in Wellington by Victoria University English professor Harry Ricketts; a troupe of boy actors from a local secondary school; and the Dane—a Great Dane, that is: the production and its imagery feature an enormous dog which for pragmatic reasons must be locally sourced. In spite of such populist touches, *The Rehearsal* was the most emphatically “high culture” of the productions discussed here. In contrast with Propeller's productions and publicity materials, which all but offer a money-back guarantee that they will make Shakespeare's meaning absolutely clear, Pan Pan expects us to know what *Hamlet* means already, or at least to be familiar with it. The Festival's publicity material—directly quoting Pan Pan's own—describes *The Rehearsal* as “an audacious and irreverent riff on *Hamlet* that does not so much update or deconstruct the play as explode it.” *The Rehearsal* is unabashedly post-modern, citing, re-citing, and blending *Hamlet* and *Endgame* within a self-referential frame that acknowledges the spectators and forces them to make interpretive decisions: why the dog? What's with the school children doing the gravedigger scene? What are we supposed to make of the Beckett connections – were we supposed to know that the trash cans on stage were those trash cans all along? Are they mocking Shakespeare or worshipping him?

In contrast with the other shows discussed here, and with its own reception elsewhere, *The Rehearsal* was not embraced by Wellington spectators. Negative¹¹ or ambivalent¹² reviews outnumbered positive¹³ ones by three to one, and I did not speak to anyone who enjoyed the play as much as I did. The negative responses share several themes, including frustration or insecurity about how to read the play in relation to Shakespeare; alienation or estrangement from the performers, in spite of the play's numerous fourth-wall-shattering tactics; and resentment that the play was not something other than what it was.

The most ambivalent response hints at factors influencing the play's negative reception in Wellington. In a brief review which covers all five Shakespearean plays for *The Listener*, a weekly national magazine, Elspeth Sandys claims to perceive the company's goal clearly, as an attempt “to stage *Hamlet* in a way that will make the audience see the play afresh” she concedes that the extent to which one finds them successful “depends on where you stand in relation to Shakespeare's most famous, and most frequently performed, play.” Sandys herself sits on the fence, but her wording is significant: she writes as though Pan Pan is *staging Hamlet*, which they are not. *The Rehearsal* relies on spectators' familiarity with *Hamlet*, and includes significant amounts of dialogue from it, but it is a very different play. Yet its critics attack it for either not *being Hamlet* or for not saying something new about *Hamlet*.

It neither deconstructs nor reconstructs Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in a form I find challenging, enlightening, provocative or even simply engaging at anything like the levels a straight production of the multi-layered classic can.¹⁴

Smythe goes to considerable length to point out, almost spitefully, all the places where Pan Pan diverges from the “real” *Hamlet*, with the effect, essentially, of condemning Pan Pan for simultaneously not being *Hamlet* and for not being something more. Radio NZ critic Paul Bushnell takes a punitive stance: “I don't know what it's doing in the festival [...] a really bad call”.¹⁵ To assure listeners of his credibility he claims to have seen many “fantastic productions of Shakespeare,” and then lists most of them. He describes *The Rehearsal* as a “feeble” parade of “very exhausted postmodern mannerisms and tricks” offering “no fresh insights,” performed “in a way which is deliberately alienating. Well ho, ho, ho.” He tells us we will get nothing out of it if

we haven't seen *Hamlet* before, and if we have, we should wait to see *FAQ* because it features a Kiwi star and "seems to [feature] a very witty and clever script." (On this point, he turns out to be half-right.)

The local casting provoked a diverse reception. Local spectators, even if they did not pay attention to the public discourse, cannot have failed to notice the Kiwi accent of the boy actors, and on the night I went, the response suggested that many of the spectators had come specifically to cheer on the young members of their families and communities making their debut on the international stage. All the critics mentioned the local cast and some suggested that the local boys were the best thing about it, but one reviewer claimed that "The supporting cast here, mostly New Zealand actors, were markedly weaker" than the pros from overseas, failing to mention that they were children.¹⁶ In this case, Shakespeare served as a vehicle for a familiar debate over whether local talent can ever be as good as cultural imports from overseas.

The contrast between Wellington's chilly reception of *The Rehearsal* and enthusiastic responses in Australia, Ireland, and the USA¹⁷ suggests the influence of cultural and material factors. At the material level, the venue clearly impeded reception. The TSB Arena, more often a host to basketball than theatre, was hastily and awkwardly fitted with plush red velvet drapery which created an air of opulence but did not remedy the bad sightlines and seating.¹⁸ On the cultural level, the critical responses imply that adaptations can and should try to be faithful to their sources, and reveal an instinct to 'protect' Shakespeare from desecration by misguided post-modernists. In condemning *The Rehearsal* for saying nothing new about *Hamlet* (a claim they fall well short of proving), the critics imply that productions *should* say something new about Shakespeare, but they also reject its innovations as 'tricks.'

Bushnell and Smythe's unusual fury may indicate their resentment that *The Rehearsal* robbed them of the pleasures of 'getting' the Shakespearean allusions and, and of demonstrating their erudition by explaining them. Although it is a relatively challenging play which rewards familiarity with Shakespeare and Beckett, *The Rehearsal* also offers a number of delightful moments that require no such sophistication, including a game of keep-away with the Great Dane play over the iconic skull (which Smythe, oddly, identifies as a deflated ball); sword-play scenes that comically undermine stage clichés (one actor resorts to an old trick from Indiana Jones to cheat his way out of a sword fight, another disarms and kills his opponent so rapidly that the duel is essentially pre-empted); and the aforementioned performance by the schoolboys. Even Lopez admits that the audience seemed to enjoy being "called down to the stage" to select the actor who will play Hamlet in act two.¹⁹ Although Smythe implies that such a play could only delight jaded spectators from the metropolis—"when you are based in Dublin, with such easy access to Britain, productions of *Hamlet* and the full Shakespeare canon are constantly available, I suppose, and therefore 'commonplace'"²⁰—it brought audible delight to many of the very young spectators sitting in the upper reaches of the TSB Arena. So why did Smythe and other reviewers all assume that their fellow spectators were struggling to make sense of it? One senses that the critics want the production to say something new about Shakespeare but not in a way that is frustrating or challenging, or at least not in ways that a professional critic struggles to explain to his or her readers.

Propeller: *Henry V* and *The Winter's Tale*

Like the reviews of *The Rehearsal*, critical responses to Propeller also imply that Shakespeare productions should somehow be simultaneously original and faithful, but Propeller's general public and critical acclaim suggest that they came closer than Pan Pan to hitting the mark. Although they did not receive uncritical adulation from New Zealand audiences just because of their authentic English pedigrees, the renowned, all-male troupe from England was warmly received, and the actors' tradition of sacrificing their interval breaks to perform songs for charity certainly earned them more goodwill than the previous team of 15 Englishmen to tour New Zealand.²¹

Both performances showcased the pillars of Propeller's mandate: a "rigorous approach to the text combined with a modern physical aesthetic."²² Moreover, the publicity blurbs in the program and on the web assure readers that, unlike Pan Pan, Propeller knows better than to mess with genius: "When you've got the words of history's best playwright to work with, why do anything else?"²³ This rhetorical question neatly sidesteps a lot of theoretical and material problems while liberating the company from offering 'new insight'—since history's greatest playwright presumably supplies all the insight you need without any riffing or exploding *à la* Pan Pan.

Although, as critics noted, the plays are "as different as chalk and cheese," the all-male ensemble, the *mise en scène*, and the basic, box-truss-based set design created an aesthetic unity.²⁴ Both productions were set in a timeless nowhere, one moment evoking a vaguely imagined past, and the next a specific present. For example, the pastoral scenes in *The Winter's Tale* clearly alluded to a Glastonbury-style rock festival, with Autolycus as an ageing rocker variously recognised by the critics as Mick Jagger²⁵ and "somewhere between Keith Richards and Iggy Pop;"²⁶ the military and religious costumes in *Henry V* combined signifiers of both ancient and modern warfare; and the music, used extensively in both productions, crossed periods, styles, and genres in ways that elevated emotional or logical harmony above historical verisimilitude. The Chorus of *Henry V* sang a repertoire including Gregorian chants, marching songs, and The Clash's 'London Calling,' while *The Winter's Tale* ranged from Leontes and his guests crooning around a piano, to Autolycus and his live band of anthropomorphic sheep ('The Bleatles') playing rock songs for concert-goers who themselves did renditions of Beyoncé.

In spite of such interpolations, which are clearly intended to help audiences connect with the material, and which also clearly succeeded (based on the palpable delight of the crowd and the responses of the critics), Propeller claims, in Festival and media publicity discourse, that its "rigorous approach to the text" is the primary means by which it "mak[es] the Bard lucid again" as one critic put it.²⁷ Director Ed Hall makes this point clear in an interview which promises that audiences will 'get' it:

I think there is a conspiracy where you go to see a show, and it sounds good, it looks good, it feels good – but you don't exactly get it, and you think: 'It must be me. Because he's really complicated and it's all that old language. But oh, they won awards for that and it was really popular, so I just don't get it.'

It's complete nonsense, [Hall] says. Shakespeare wrote his plays for an audience that was 90 per cent illiterate. They are actually very robust and clear. [...]

'They're very workmanlike, they're commercial bits of writing. I think our younger audiences sometimes come to the shows and are extraordinarily surprised to understand what's going on.'²⁸

As promised, both productions delivered exceptionally clear renditions of the text, although the publicity discourse downplays the extent to which music and visual *mise en scène*, not vocal and textual technical proficiency, clarify the narrative and relationships between characters. The publicity and marketing materials pre-empt critical skepticism of gimmicky *mise en scène* by focusing on the company's reverence for the sacred text and Hall's insistence that the text has always been lucid, in spite of shadowy 'conspiracies' to make it seem otherwise.

Both Propeller shows were polished, slick, and professional, making good on the promises of clarity and physicality, and Wellington's spectators seemed overwhelmingly pleased. Responses in print, online, and by word of mouth were almost invariably positive, and the audiences at the performances I attended were evidently delighted, although standing ovations were scattered, as if the spectators were consciously stopping just short of unqualified adulation. Propeller also enjoyed much more media coverage than the other shows discussed here. Both shows received numerous reviews (including some by publications which did not review anything else, such as *The Lumière*, a film-oriented publication), and Propeller also received more publicity in general, including previews and interviews, than most other Festival shows. Hall and his actors were

interviewed in print and on air multiple times before and during their visit to Wellington. Although, as we will see, the critics took care to show that they were not star-struck, the relative over-representation of Propeller in the Festival's public discourse is indicative of the high esteem for and public interest in a visiting Shakespeare company from the mother country.

The critics expressed admiration for Propeller's performances in exactly the terms that Propeller's publicity discourse lays out for them, focusing on the company's crisp delivery of the text and impressive physical energy. Most critics also applauded Propeller's anachronistic musical interpolations (along with occasional added dialogue, such as Autolycus's exhortation, "Take it away, saxophone sheep!"). Yet, even as they did so, they claimed that it was the company's fidelity to the text, not its inventive interpolations, that made the play clear and accessible. Sandys claims that

[Propeller's] intention [...] is simple – to honour the original text by telling the story with as much clarity and energy as possible. No tricks, no dumbing down, but plenty of innovation in the use of contemporary visual language.²⁹

Sandys implies that Propeller reaches its objectives without crossing the blurry line between 'tricks' and 'innovation'—she even explains Hall's potentially unfaithful directing choices on his behalf: "since Time in this play is both enabler and narrator, it is fitting that once again liberties are taken, and the period of the story rendered inexact."

Several critics responding to *Henry V* addressed the 'important' issue of whether Henry is represented in terms of the heroic or the *Realpolitik*. The general consensus is that Propeller offers an admirably 'complex' king: "The legend lived because it [the production?] didn't simplify him."³⁰ Atkinson approvingly notes that "[t]his production allows you to make up your own mind whether Henry is a war criminal or a hero."³¹ But does it? I was not convinced. On the one hand, Propeller deploys Brechtian tactics to show how easily young men can be manipulated into enlisting to fight in imperialistic wars if combat is framed as an opportunity to perform masculinity and fraternity, particularly in the scenes depicting "the youth of England [...] on fire," singing The Clash's 'London Calling.' On the other hand, Propeller's representation of the French characters—using broad accents and effeminate, simpering gestures—is stereotypical and dehumanizing. Although the staging gives Henry opportunities to address the audience as both his band of brothers and as the citizens of Harfleur (whom he threatens to murder and rape in a speech some critics found disturbing), both historical and linguistic ties and Propeller's 'Othering' of the French characters work to align the Kiwi audience unambiguously with the English characters (the actors' Brechtian distance from their characters is much more evident when they play the French).³² In addition, as two critics pointed out, this production airbrushes Henry's darker shadows by staging Bardolph's execution "before King Henry arrives on the scene, making Henry's 'We would have all such offenders so cut off' simply a seal of approval on an act that has already happened".³³ Bisley reads this choice, along with Fluellen's retroactive justification of the slaughter of the prisoners,³⁴ not as sanitising Henry but as indicating that the actions are "fated to happen whatever he does" —a notion quite out of joint with the interpretation of the play, advanced by Roger Warren's essay in the glossy program, as a troubling portrayal of Henry's merciless aspects.

The critics enjoyed both Propeller shows, but stop short of gushing; each finds something to complain about as if it were a compulsory part of the job. Horder and Leigh express unease about the treatment of female characters, Leigh being particularly critical of the staging of the scene between Henry and Katherine (and the absence of the kiss between them, which struck me, too, as oddly cowardly), though both are ultimately impressed by the serious treatment of the women in *The Winter's Tale*: "It is nice to see that the company can commit to some of its cross-gender casting in an authentic way though the dynamism that should exist between Paulina and Leontes is rather weak in this production."³⁵ While some critics applauded Propeller for critiquing warfare, others felt the production failed in this regard, including one RNZ critic who claimed the

Compass Points: The Locations, Landscapes and Coordinates of Identities in Contemporary Performance Making, Australasian Association for Drama Theatre & Performance Studies (ADSA) 2012 Conference Proceedings, ed. Bree Hadley and Caroline Heim, Queensland University of Technology, 2012

show – compared to the Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh films—offered no new insight into the nature or ethics of warfare: “What’s the attitude to war? It doesn’t seem to have one.”³⁶ All the critics recommend the show, but each finds something unsatisfactory about it. Although it is impossible to determine a common motive, it is tempting to suggest that the critics wanted to demonstrate that the renowned troupe from England did not overwhelm their critical capacity by the sheer force of their fame and charisma.

The Māori Troilus and Cressida–Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira

No such critical reservations were applied, however, to the premiere of *The Māori Troilus and Cressida–Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira*. This production received by far the most exuberant ovation of any show I saw at the festival. It was reviewed twice each by Radio NZ and Theatreview.org, and also by the Dominion Post and the New Zealand Herald, and each critic heaped almost unqualified praise on the production. The critics’ unanimous approval is remarkable for at least two reasons: first, for most spectators, the play was literally incomprehensible. Neither the play’s critics, nor its Pakeha-dominated audience, nor even all of the actors, are fluent in Māori language, and as many critics pointed out, *Troilus and Cressida* is neither widely familiar nor easy to follow. Second, compared to the other productions discussed here, the experience of watching *The Māori Troilus and Cressida–Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira*, as distinct from the performance itself, was physically gruelling and objectively unpleasant.

For reasons never made clear, the play, which was scheduled to be performed outdoors in the plaza in front of Te Papa, was moved to the marae on the fourth floor of Te Papa. Though visually striking, the marae is an appalling performance venue, with no rake, no crossover space to facilitate entrances and exits, terrible sightlines, mediocre acoustics, and insufficient seating. It was also hot and stuffy, in contrast to the perfect weather outside (as one could see through the glass rear wall of the marae). Unlike the Globe in London, which the performers were ostensibly preparing for, this venue forced spectators at the back to stand, behind a sea of chairs, in front of which another cohort of spectators sat on the floor. The resulting sightline problem was significant because, as every critic acknowledges, a play which performs an unfamiliar story in a language not spoken by its audience must rely heavily on body language and gesture. The one Māori-speaking critic, Paul Diamond, admitted that he could not hear all the dialogue from the rear of the marae. The actors had to step over and squeeze through throngs of uncomfortable spectators standing on cement floors at the back of the theatre, creating clunky, distracting transitions and entrances. The cramped space also did not support the epic scale of the story. Overall, the experience was more like enduring an ordeal than enjoying an entertainment, and I was not alone in feeling this way: the attrition rate was high and the audience thinned out noticeably after the interval (much to the relief of standing spectators who were able to claim vacated chairs).

This is not to say that it was impossible to enjoy or admire the play. All the critics agreed that the play made “full and appropriate use” of a cornucopia of Māori performance elements—haka, taiaha, mau rakau, and taonga puoro.³⁷ And among Māori language speakers, including the producers, the one Māori-fluent critic, and others I have spoken to since, including a Māori language scholar, there is a consensus that Te Haumihiata Mason’s translation or, more accurately, tradaptation,³⁸ represents a superb rendition of the Shakespeare play, a splendid achievement for Māori language, or both. And on the night I saw the play it received the most enthusiastic ovation of any festival show I witnessed. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that none of the critics mention any of the aforementioned problems (except Sandys, who criticises the venue), particularly since both the punishing conditions of the performance space and the linguistic limitations of most spectators made it impossible to simply immerse oneself in the fiction.

In addition, the professional critics adopt quite different criteria than those applied to Pan Pan and Propeller. Not only do they not expect the Ngakau Toa production to furnish new insights into Shakespeare (as they demanded of *The Rehearsal* and *Henry V*), they don’t even expect to fully understand what is going on.

Compass Points: The Locations, Landscapes and Coordinates of Identities in Contemporary Performance Making, Australasian Association for Drama Theatre & Performance Studies (ADSA) 2012 Conference Proceedings, ed. Bree Hadley and Caroline Heim, Queensland University of Technology, 2012

Whereas critics of *The Rehearsal* blamed the play for their failure to 'get' it, critics of *Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira* blamed themselves: "From my perspective the show presents a sharp reminder of the impoverishment of being monolingual."³⁹ Rather than evaluating the extent to which the play captures or expands upon Shakespeare's qualities, the reviews focus on the extent to which *Toroihi* entails a triumph for te reo Māori while yet remaining totally comprehensible to anyone who happens not to speak it.⁴⁰ Laurie Atkinson lost the plot after the second scene; she describes a prologue in which the two camps challenge each other with haka, and a first scene in which *Toroihi* curses Herena (Helen) for starting the war, "and then," she continues, "the play is off into some complex situations (a crib sheet is provided) that get a little bit confusing at the end."⁴¹ But this does not seem to bother her.⁴²

Whereas the critics judge the Propeller and Pan Pan shows, they act as boosters for *Toroihi*, going out of their way to supply contextual material and commentary that might help the audience make sense of the play (which is famous, if at all, for being difficult and obscure).⁴³ On Radio NZ, host Eva Radich and critic Jonathan Hendry anxiously insist that the play is "very contemporary"; "it's just like what you might imagine happening in any powerful family," says Radich—but not even Hendry sounds convinced.⁴⁴ John Smythe, too, claims in both print and radio reviews that "there was no problem [...] about not knowing the language," and yet, in spite of having sneered at *The Rehearsal* for only being accessible to an audience already familiar with *Hamlet*, he says "you'd be mad not to" prepare for *Toroihi* by reading *Troilus and Cressida*.⁴⁵

The reception of *Toroihi* also contrasts with that of the Pan Pan and Propeller shows insofar as it reflects an awareness of what the production's symbolic importance. This sense of symbolic importance, for both new Zealand theatre in general and te reo Māori in particular, permeates both the print responses and in the response from the audience the night I saw the show—especially among the large Māori contingent at the front of the marae (which itself contrasted visibly, in this regard, with the audiences at the other plays discussed here). *Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira* was not just an opportunity to indulge in an evening's entertainment or get some culture—it was a way for the spectators themselves to perform their pride in Māori (or more generally Aotearoa) culture. The production accrued considerable emblematic significance, both as a literary achievement and because of its place of pride opening the Globe to Globe festival on Shakespeare's birthday, an achievement one Radio NZ host describes as "a gold medal for New Zealand theatre."⁴⁶ In the documents of reception, this symbolic significance often overshadows the qualities of the play.⁴⁷

One discrepancy in the reception of *Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira* merits further discussion. Paul Diamond writes

My only gripe is the portrayal of Patroclus (Patokihi), played by Rangi Rangitukunoa. [...] In this production, Patokihi – described in programme notes as an iherei (person of rank, leader) of the Greeks – is played as a camp, simpering caricature, in contrast to the masculine Achilles/Aikiri. The use of tired, and frankly offensive stereotypes with no basis in history or literature perhaps says more about our own time and sexual hang-ups.⁴⁸

I concur with Diamond's assessment, and I find it odd, and somewhat shameful, that none of Diamond's peers took issue with the offensively stereotypical representation of Patokihi. It is impossible that they did not notice, since, as has been established, body language and gesture was their main source of semiotic information, and there was nothing subtle about it. Did the critics ignore this blatant, regressive stereotyping for fear of upsetting the public, spoiling the coming out party, or being characterised (like the production itself) as "PC gone mad?" The critics expressed reservations about Propeller's treatment of female characters, which was much less offensive, so the code of silence in this case seems puzzling.

Material conditions loom large in the reception of *Toroihi*, in a way that was so obvious (and yet so troubling) that no critics acknowledged it. In contrast with the other productions cited here, which were performed in

large and opulently decorated theatres equipped with luxurious amenities and concessions, and cost \$40-\$90 to attend, *Toroihi* was performed in a sparsely equipped public space (albeit a culturally privileged one) at no cost to spectators (who could make a koha on their way out). The obvious explanation for these choices is that the producers wanted to ensure that Māori spectators would have access to the play, and the only way to do this was to eliminate economic barriers. While I cannot fully address the uncomfortable implications of this situation within the parameters of this essay, the choice to remove economic barriers undoubtedly worked for the play to the extent that it created an audience that was heavily invested in it. The end of the show provoked an explosive ovation, particularly from the large Māori contingent concentrated at the front of the venue, which made the response to the plays discussed above look tepid by comparison.

Conclusions

Although his status as compulsory literature in New Zealand schools may be in doubt, the reception of Shakespeare at the 2012 NZIAF shows that Shakespeare's status as a talisman of high culture is still entrenched in New Zealand culture. No critic questions the value of performing Shakespeare in 2012 in Wellington, and the robust attendance at all the events mentioned here suggests that the public concurs with the critics on this point.⁴⁹ Doing Shakespeare, therefore, implies expectations or standards that might not apply to productions of other shows by other authors. While it is dangerous to equate critical response with what the audience thought (and yet difficult to establish clear distinctions), the critical responses also indicate that how Shakespeare means depends on where he is perceived to come from. The high volume of media coverage for Propeller, relative to other shows, and the attendance of their shows by large groups of students, indicates the extent to which Kiwis still think 'real' British Shakespeare is especially important. Audiences (including critics) responded positively to Propeller's promise of straight, 'lucid' Shakespeare with no gimmicks, but were put off by Pan Pan's meddling with *Hamlet*. Moreover, while critics declared *The Rehearsal* a flop for demanding familiarity with *Hamlet*, they hailed *Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira* as a triumph even though it demanded familiarity with either the play or a language that most of its audience did not speak. Both *The Rehearsal* and, to a lesser extent, *Henry V*, were upbraided for failing to offer new insight into Shakespeare, while critics of *Toroihi* did not mind that whatever insights it offered were available only to the very small population of people who are familiar with both *Troilus and Cressida* and *te reo Māori*.

The critics' hostile response to *The Rehearsal* reflects their impulse to police Shakespeare and set limits on what is or is not acceptable to do with him—at least in a serious, prestigious, high cultural context like the NZIAF. It also may reflect the fact that the critics are accustomed to using Shakespeare as a vehicle to demonstrate their own cultural capital by 'shepherding' their readers through the plays and explaining exactly how a production makes (or fails to make) Shakespeare clear, relevant, and accessible. *The Rehearsal* disintermediates critics somewhat, because on the one hand its use of Shakespeare and Beckett cannot be reduced to a simple explanation in a 300-word review, and on the other hand many of its more enjoyable moments need no critical interpretation in order for 'lay' spectators to enjoy them: we do not need the critics' help to delight in the image of Hamlet as a Great Dane playing keep-away with Yorick's skull.

It is tempting to read the critics' pride in local productions, and their comparatively dispassionate scrutiny of touring productions, as a sign that contemporary New Zealand is overcoming its well-known and widely-lamented 'cultural cringe' (which implies a tendency to believe that 'real' culture—and especially real Shakespeare, always comes from overseas/Britain). However, I argue that the extent to which the critics went to find faults in the touring shows and ignore them in the home-grown productions is simply a mirror image of the cultural cringe. The uncritical praise for *Toroihi* suggests not just anxiety about how it would be perceived in London six weeks later, but also a desire to establish its significance to local audiences and, by extension, to validate and advocate for a vision of New Zealand/Aotearoa as an enlightened, bicultural nation, in which the announcement of a Māori translation of Shakespeare would always be greeted with enthusiasm and curiosity

rather than dismissive claims that a Māori interpretation of Shakespeare “defeats the purpose of learning Shakespeare,” or represents “PC gone mad.”⁵⁰ In addition, one wonders whether a Māori-language production based on another source—or a wholly original play—would have earned such instant praise and recognition as a major “fillip for the [Māori] language.”⁵¹ The warm reviews of *Toroihi Rāua Ko Kāhira* contain a troubling implication that te reo Māori “needs” Shakespeare to save itself. This topic requires further investigation and more grounding in historical and cultural context than is within the scope of this essay.

While much has changed since the days when New Zealand audiences looked uncritically toward Britain—and British Shakespeare—for cultural and aesthetic models, it is also clear that New Zealand still reads Shakespeare through the complex legacies of its colonial past. As Knowles suggests in *Reading the Material Theatre*, context is everything. In spite of the conventional assumption that the meaning of a play is contained in the performance (or text) and transmitted to the audience, Shakespeare’s meaning, in these productions, has much to do with where and when he is perceived to come from, and who is claiming to present (or interpret) him. New Zealand critics accepted Propeller’s claims that they merely presented the text unmediated (which they did not), and they embraced the notion that Māori artists have a legitimate claim to appropriate and adapt Shakespeare, and they even accepted Michael Hurst’s farcical solo show as serious art, yet they rejected Pan Pan’s “explosion” of Hamlet as beyond the pale, so to speak, of ‘acceptable’ or authorised Shakespeare. This investigation also reveals the importance of public discourse, including marketing materials, in establishing and defining the contexts in which plays appear—the NZIAF’s imagery and publicity discourse works both to efface the different aesthetic and political objectives of these productions, and also to instruct reviewers how to explain the shows to their audiences. In addition, although I have used them sparingly, there is an ever-expanding archive of materials available to those who wish to document and analyse theatrical reception, as online media create space for, and preserve, the responses of ‘regular’ spectators, challenging the dominance of theatre critics. More analysis is also needed to document the ways in which material and ideological factors influence Shakespeare’s reception in New Zealand, particularly in contexts other than a high culture, international arts festival. It seems likely that Shakespeare will remain a compass point for New Zealand’s artists and audiences, but it is also evident that his is a wandering star, not a fixed one.

NOTES

¹ For examples of the continuing debate over Shakespeare’s role in the NZ secondary curriculum, see Dekker; Neale; ‘Shakespeare Gets School Reprieve.’ The present essay offers a synchronic analysis of Shakespeare reception in 2012, rather than surveying Shakespeare’s history in New Zealand/Aotearoa, but see Houlahan regarding Shakespeare’s historic function as a touchstone of British/ Pākehā culture.

² As Fischlin, Kidnie and others have shown, there is no clear way of distinguishing between “adaptation” and “the original” in theatre, nor for drawing the line between “adaptation” and “new work,” but in this context I will consider only shows that were explicitly marketed through their connection to Shakespeare.

³ Richard Paul Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9.

⁴ Ibid. 19.

⁵ Those who seek comparisons with Shakespeare reception in a different national and historical context may be interested in Knowles’s investigation of “how Shakespeare means” at the 1993 Stratford Festival in Canada, which comprises chapter 3 of *Reading the Material Theatre* (106).

⁶ ‘About Us & Contacts’. New Zealand International Arts Festival. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.

⁷ See *Statistics New Zealand*. Wellington’s high cost of living also factors in here, because it, along with New Zealand’s poor loan and grant support for tertiary students, relative to other first-world nations, means that the city’s large population of tertiary students have very little disposable time and money to see plays.

⁸ Knowles 81, original emphasis.

⁹ ‘The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane’. New Zealand International Arts Festival - 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2012.

¹⁰ ‘New Zealand International Arts Festival - 2012 - Theatre - Frequently Asked Questions’. Festival.co.nz. Web. 17 Apr. 2012.

¹¹ Smythe, John, ‘More Matter, Less Art Please’. *Theatreview.org*. 25 Feb. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012. India Lopez, ‘Review: The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane’. Stuff.co.nz 25 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 Apr. 2012.

- ¹² Elspeth Sandys, 'Henry V, The Winter's Tale, The Māori Troilus and Cressida, The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane and Frequently Asked Questions Review – Theatre – Culture – New Zealand Listener'. *The Listener.co.nz*. 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ¹³ Ewen Coleman, 'Review: The Rehearsal, Playing The Dane'. *Stuff.co.nz* 26 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 Apr. 2012.
- ¹⁴ John Smythe, 'More Matter, Less Art Please'. *Theatreview.org*. 25 Feb. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ¹⁵ Paul Bushnell, 'Festival Review for 27 February 2012'. Radio New Zealand. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2012.
- ¹⁶ Lopez.
- ¹⁷ *The Rehearsal* was warmly received in Melbourne just a few months earlier, with even the more apprehensive respondents looking for reasons to like the show. In the comments following Debbie Cuthbertson's review on ABC online, one reader writes: Not ashamed to admit that, having seen this at Saturday's matinee, I did not 'get' this at all. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it: I very much did, but I didn't really understand the 'point' of the second act. It could just be me, though, and I suspect that it was. It was still fantastic. (qtd in Cuthbertson)
- ¹⁸ This may explain why I enjoyed the play, from my front row seat, so much more than anyone else who saw it. Bushnell complained explicitly about the sightlines and seating, and the former is an implicit factor in Smythe's misidentification of the skull, in the opening sequence, as a deflated ball.
- ¹⁹ Lopez.
- ²⁰ Smythe.
- ²¹ The English national rugby team was pilloried in local and international press for its scandalous off-field behaviour and lacklustre on-field performances during the 2011 Rugby World Cup, generating near-record levels of *schadenfreude* among All-Black fans.
- ²² Tom Fitzsimons, 'Making the Bard Lucid Again'. *Stuff.co.nz* 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ²³ NZIAF 2012 Program 12
- ²⁴ Elspeth Sandys, 'Henry V, The Winter's Tale, The Māori Troilus and Cressida, The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane and Frequently Asked Questions Review – Theatre – Culture – New Zealand Listener'. *The Listener.co.nz*. 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ²⁵ Ibid
- ²⁶ Tom Horder, 'The Winter's Tale'. The Lumiere Reader. 7 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ²⁷ Tom Fitzsimons, 'Making the Bard Lucid Again'. *Stuff.co.nz* 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ²⁸ Ibid
- ²⁹ Sandys
- ³⁰ Charles Bisley, 'Henry V'. The Lumiere Reader. 2 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ³¹ Laurie Atkinson, 'Review: Henry V'. *Stuff.co.nz* 1 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ³² On the contrary, Sandys was haunted by "the slaughter of the French prisoners, with its uncanny mirroring of the abuses at Abu Ghraib" – but if anything her ability to see the French as the dehumanised inmates of Abu Ghraib emphasises the extent to which Propeller's performance conventions othered the French characters and Frenchness generally.
- ³³ Lori Leigh, 'Solid, Bold, and Often Very Brave in "Becoming" the Story'. *Theatreview.org*. 1 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ³⁴ In the play, as Roger Warren points out in the glossy program, Henry orders the execution of the prisoners at the end of 4.6, *before* Gower (or Fluellen in the Propeller production) discovers the murdered baggage boys in 4.7 and retroactively attributes this as the motive for the execution which has already taken place (Warren 7).
- ³⁵ Lori Leigh, 'Moving and Magical'. *Theatreview.org*. 2 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ³⁶ 'Festival Review for 1 March 2012'. *Radio New Zealand*. 1 Mar. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.
- Not all critics agreed that Branagh's film was anti-war, though it was marketed as such. See Curtis Bright, for example.
- ³⁷ Jim Mora and John Smythe. Radio New Zealand : National : Programmes : Afternoons : Festival Review for 12 March 2012; Diamond, Paul. 'An Awe-Inspiring Marvel.' *Theatreview.org*. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ³⁸ Mason's text is many things other than a Māori translation of Shakespeare's play: among other things, it is an experiment in linguistic revitalization written in a classical form of the language that is no longer spoken; it adds Māori performance elements that have no equivalent in the Shakespeare text; and it makes a number of cuts and changes in order to accommodate the Globe's limit on running time.
- ³⁹ Paul Simei-Barton, 'Theatre Review: The Māori *Troilus & Cressida*'. *nzherald.co.nz*. 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ⁴⁰ Diamond Smyth; and Simei-Barton.
- ⁴¹ Laurie Atkinson, 'Standing Ovation for Pre-Birthday Māori Performance'. *Theatreview.org*. 10 Mar. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- ⁴² Although John Smythe's praise for the play extends even to the "excellent scene-by-scene synopsis," I found the crib sheet confusing, since it was missing one or two scenes and sparsely detailed, as if composed in haste.
- ⁴³ As actor/producer Rawiri Paratene explains in a number of interviews, *Troilus and Cressida* was selected by the Globe's producers, apparently because they thought it was his favourite play (Paratene).
- ⁴⁴ Eva Radich and Jonathan Hendry, "Māori Troilus and Cressida Review." Radio New Zealand. 12 March 2012. Web. 1 June 2012.
- ⁴⁵ Jim Mora and John Smythe. *Radio New Zealand : National : Programmes : Afternoons : Festival Review for 12 March 2012*.
- ⁴⁶ Rawiri Paratene. 'The Arts on Sunday.' *Radio New Zealand*. 15 May 2011.
- ⁴⁷ Contrasting with the critical approval and ovation, two articles provoked both a heated debate among online readers. Although these comments were not responses to the play, per se, they are indicative of how Shakespeare means in contemporary New Zealand, because they focus on the question of whether, as one headline reads, "Te Reo Fits Shakespeare 'Perfectly.'" One reader wrote back, "Shakespeare was written in english [sic] with all its nuances. Just like operas [sic] language is Italian it does not translate well! This is PC gone mad." Another asked, apologetically, "doesn't this defeat the purpose of learning Shakespeare?," arguing that since "[his]

plays are as much about the language used as they are the story ... [they] are no more performing Shakespeare than they are performing plays based on his works - much akin to *West Side Story*" ('Māori Shakespeare Set for Games').

⁴⁸Ibid, Diamond.

⁴⁹ However, in post-festival "best of" lists, neither the public, the critics, nor celebrity spectators listed any of the Shakespearean performances among their highlights. See 'Arts Festival Critics Choose Favourites'; 'Arts Fest Enthusiasts Pick Their Favourites'; Speer.

⁵⁰ 'Māori Shakespeare Set for Games'. *Stuff.co.nz* 24 Jan. 2011. Web. 9 Apr. 2012, comments 2 and 3.

⁵¹Ibid, Diamond.