

practices—however ancient or new-fangled—is glossed over in this focus on cloth production activities, which today are the domain of commoner women.

While the film does mention the increasing global relevance of Tongan barkcloth, which is responsible for a large part of the demand for Tongan ngatu and the consequent depletion of plant raw materials, it elides the underlying topic of Tongans' economic dependence on overseas-based Tongans. In order to contextualize Tongan modernity, the filmmakers might have explained that Tonga has been a Christian nation with a top-down motivation toward national modernization for almost 200 years. This would also have provided some context for the prayers and hymns that women say continually throughout the film. I do, however, acknowledge that a major difficulty in narrative history is that it is entirely possible to lose important context available from other sources—history books, elite Tongans, diasporic Tongans. A map or the geographical coordinates of the Kingdom of Tonga (or both) would also have been helpful in situating Tonga geographically and historically in the world.

The film's penultimate scene is touching and visually impressive, panning outward from its focus on an elderly Tongan noblewoman, as she says a Christian prayer, to reveal several large ngatu spread outdoors on the ground before her. Her prayer is that "Tongan will remain for Tongans . . . so that Tonga may continue to be Tonga . . . lest we stray in the face of progress. . . . may we not be lost."

In the final scene, the narrator reiterates the film's title: "The old women say, 'Kuo hina 'e hiapo'" (The mulberry is ripe and ready for harvest). She emphasizes a generational rift by stating that younger people are rarely heard using this saying. The message of generational tensions resonates, echoing the sentiments of an older kautaha woman who confidently states that ngatu-making "will never end in this land" and a younger woman who says, "It seems like the younger generation will forget." Thus the filmmakers provide a well-balanced presentation of these differing opinions, even as the film ends on a positive note: "Like the beating of a heart as long as the beating of tutu can be heard . . . the culture and traditions of Tonga will live on." I commend the filmmakers for not attempting to make any firm predictions about the future of ngatu and ngatu-making and for letting the women, and their cloth, speak for themselves.

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The Songmaker's Chair, a play by Albert Wendt. Directed by Nathaniel Lees, Auckland Theatre Company, Maidment Theater, Auckland, 11–27 September 2003.

The world premier of *The Songmaker's Chair* played to sold-out audiences in September 2003 at the Maidment Theatre in Auckland. In the program, Robert Nash called it an "evocative, delightful work that only New Zealand can produce; a play

that brilliantly celebrates the wonderfully diverse Pacific migration to New Zealand and how it has enriched our cultures.” After it was written by Wendt in 1996, and given two well-received rehearsed readings (the first at Downstage in Wellington in 1997 and the second at the Auckland Writer’s Festival in 2001), it was totally appropriate that the play was produced by the Auckland Theatre Company as part of the first Auckland Festival. The company’s education unit also brought the play alive for local schools by offering an opportunity for secondary drama students from throughout Auckland to experience in-school workshops, matinee performances, and forums.

On the surface, the play is about the migrant Peseola family and the problems they face fitting into a new community. But it is much more than that. As Wendt says in the program: “This play began many years ago in Samoa as an image of an old man, my father sitting in his favourite chair beside a large radio: a haunting image that refused to go away! I brought it with me to Auckland in 1988. From that year until I wrote the first full version of the play in 1996, I saw a lot of Pakeha, Maori and Pacific plays—a truly magnificent and dynamic development in our country’s theatre that continues today. I acknowledge my debt to such playwrights as Harry Dansey, John Kneubuhl, Selwyn Muru, Vincent O’Sullivan, Briar Grace-Smith, Hone Kouka, Oscar Kightley, Makerita Urale, Toa Fraser, Jacob Rajan, Vilsoni Hereniko, Victoria Kneubuhl and others. I was absolutely taken by those plays—and I learnt much from them. . . . Since

I came to Aotearoa in 1952 I have observed and written poetry and fiction about the Samoan and Pacific migrant experience. This play is my latest attempt to encapsulate that and to celebrate the lives of those courageous migrant families who have made Auckland and Aotearoa their home. It is also in gratitude to the tangata whenua who welcomed us into their home. . . . Like the Peseola family, our journeys have been from our ancient atua and pasts to the new fusion and mix and Rap that is now Aotearoa and Auckland. We have added to and continue to change that extraordinary fusion, the heart of which is still Maori and of Moana nui a kiwa [Great seas of the Pacific, or the peoples of the Pacific residing in New Zealand].”

The play tells of a Samoan family, Aiga Sa-Peseola, who have been in Auckland since the 1950s. To survive and adapt to New Zealand, they have over three generations intermarried with Maori and Pakeha and have developed what they refer to as the “Peseola way.” Central to the “Peseola way” is the magnificent Polynesian exploration and settlement of the Pacific and a song-making tradition which Peseola Olaga, the patriarch of the family (played by Nathaniel Lees), has inherited from his father. At the heart of the play is the love between Peseola Olaga and his wife Malaga (played by Ana Tuigamala) and how they have struggled to give their children a good life in Aotearoa. Theirs is the Peseola Way: defiant, honest, and unflinching even in the face of death.

For one hour and fifty minutes (the play is continuous with no interval) the audience is part of an intimate

journey in which we witness Pese and Malaga in their twilight years, engaging with different family members—sons, daughters, Palagi and Maori in-laws, friends—in what would seem normal aiga (family) conversations and events, often displaying the cross-cultural misunderstandings, confusion, anger, and amusement that surround the tensions and “playing out” of faasamoa (Samoan way of life) in migrant situations. During these (and often accompanied by intellectualized and verbalized thoughts), secrets are revealed, reconciled, and dealt with.

What is extraordinary about this play is that interwoven with this is the infusion of the unknown, mysterious, and metaphysical world of death in which Peseola realizes his human frailty and mortality, evidenced by dreams and the presence of aitu (spirits). By the end of the play he reconciles death and this journey, and accepts and prepares himself for the inevitable. Peseola’s love and fascination for his “chair” mirrors the centrality of the aiga and faasamoa values that are dominant themes in the play. Another perhaps unresolved theme alluded to is the diluted Samoan identities of Samoan children born and raised in New Zealand, interestingly referred to by Peseola as “the lost generation.”

Nathaniel Lees, director and leading actor in *The Songmaker’s Chair*, is not only a well-known and respected actor and director, but he is also Wendt’s cousin, which gives a special dimension to his interpretation of the play.

The “new fusion and mix” that is evidenced by the fifty-year history of Samoans in New Zealand is success-

fully interwoven throughout the play in the music, the dance, the humor, as well as the dialogue that is used to explore ancient Samoan beliefs and genealogies and to examine ways they are worked out in a new time and place. Thus the clever and understandable use of “Samoan English,” with a heavy dose of Samoan dialogue, was skillfully woven into the script and made comprehensible for monolingual English-speakers through the accompanying action.

The cast of actors ranged from novice to extremely experienced, with superb and riveting performances by Nathaniel Lees and Ana Tuigamala (her theatrical debut), and outstanding audiovisual design (Sima Urale) and direction (Nathaniel Lees and Nancy Brunning).

Having strongly supported moves toward building the Fale Pasifika Complex at the University of Auckland (a beautiful addition to the architecture of the Auckland city campus), Albert Wendt has been appointed for two years to an endowed chair, the Citizens Chair in English Literature at the University of Hawai‘i. In mid-2004, Wendt was awarded the prestigious Nikkei Asia Award. This prize is given annually by a Japanese newspaper for regional growth, science, and culture, and recognizes Professor Wendt’s works, which “introduce the traditions and cultures of Samoa and other Pacific Island nations, previously only passed down orally, in plain yet lyrical English for readers around the world” (*New Zealand Herald*, 24 May 2004; announced in September 2003 in the *University News* 33 [8]:3). We celebrate *The Songmaker’s Chair* with Wendt, as

an acknowledgement and honoring of his remarkable achievements as Pacific novelist, poet, artist, and playwright extraordinaire!

Ia manuia le tapuaiga! (Blessed are the nonparticipants; thank you for all the moral support from those not directly involved.)

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No diacritical marks were included in Samoan and Maori words this review at the request of the reviewer. All translations by reviewer.

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Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific. Asia Societies Galleries, New York, New York, 18 February–9 May 2004.

I was drawn to the recent exhibition of “Pacific” art at New York’s Asia Society Galleries both because of its resonance with the thematic of Indigenous art emerging in the world and because the inclusion of New Zealand represents a new, and challenging, step for the Asia Society’s geographical orientation and its usual viewers. Aside from recognizing the presence of Pacific people in New York, the exhibition is a striking expression of the fit between the practices of conceptual and performance art and the circumstances of postcolonial indigeneity and diaspora.

Sixteen years ago, the exhibition of Aboriginal Australian art at this gallery caused a fabulous stir of recognition and response throughout New York. If that exhibition addressed the question of Aboriginal cultural pro-

duction as art, *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific*—thoughtfully curated by Melissa Chiu, herself an Australian—has a very different, political and conceptual edge. Consisting of forty-five works by fifteen contemporary artists, the central frame of this exhibition (accompanied and illuminated by an excellent catalog) lies in the artists’ engagement with influential images of the Pacific forged by eighteenth-century French and English explorers, familiar images of insular, verdant islands with friendly, uninhibited people. The artists—some residents of New Zealand, but including Māori, New Caledonian, Samoan, Fijian, Torres Strait Islander, Rotuman, and Niuean—respond in different ways to the confinements and concealments of the Paradise myth. With different particular histories, coming from different islands, they also represent an emergent “Pacific” identity in the region, one more cosmopolitan and distinct from the themes of the familiar Primitivism so vehemently rejected in critical writing over the past few decades, and also one that does not disclaim its histories.

Different strategies and tactics of engagement are employed. Some of the works play with and subvert ideas of Paradise—drawing attention to the degradation of the Pacific environment that has taken place in the wake of European attention. Others comment on the changing nature of local customs and cultures. They foreground the emerging cosmopolitanism and changing relationships to local cultures cited and distanced through the migrations that have brought so many Islanders to New