

Book and Media Reviews

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Théâtre océanien: Anthologie, edited and translated by Sonia Lacabanne. Collection Littératures du Pacifique. Papeete: Au vent des îles, 2011. ISBN 978-2-9156-5483-7, 364 pages. Paper, XPF 2143.

Urbanesia: Four Pasifika Plays, edited by David O'Donnell. New Zealand Play Series. Wellington: Playmarket, 2012. ISBN 978-0-908607-43-3, 312 pages, illustrations, bibliography. Paper, NZ\$40.00.

Since the 1960s, the Pacific region has witnessed the development and proliferation of contemporary drama in numerous sites. This has been a varied output, inflected by local cultural, economic, and sociopolitical circumstances but also representing mutual concerns and aesthetic techniques. Unlike other literary genres such as poetry and prose, drama as an embodied, collaborative art form does not have its primary life on the page, and print publication has often been of secondary importance to public performance. In recent years, these works have started to appear more regularly in published form, often many years after their original staging, signaling an awareness of their significance as literary texts and a commitment to their wider circulation for study and production.

In addition to stand-alone volumes, several published anthologies have brought together works by various playwrights, enabling broader conversations about the plays themselves and the state of playwriting and performance in particular locales. *Five New Guinea Plays* (Beier, 1971), for example, collates provocative, anticolonial

dramas written by university students prior to Papua New Guinea's independence from Australia; *He Reo Hou: 5 Plays by Maori Playwrights* (Garrett, 1991) charts the emergence of several Māori dramatists in Aotearoa/New Zealand between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s; *He Leo Hou / A New Voice: Hawaiian Playwrights* (Wat and Desha, 2001) surveys a vibrant cross-section of contemporary work by indigenous playwrights in Hawai'i; and *Beyond Ceremony: An Anthology of Drama from Fiji* (Gaskell, 2001) demonstrates how playwrights have used theater to respond to and intervene in Fiji's troubled multicultural milieu.

Such anthologies have been instrumental in helping create a more lasting record of past productions and reveal historical, thematic, and artistic patterns among authors and plays. But as these examples show, there has been a tendency to focus on local or national concerns or to feature playwrights from specific ethnic groups. Less in evidence are collections that speak across national borders, that emphasize a wider regional view, and that traverse linguistic boundaries beyond the code-switching contained in individual works. Consequently, two recent anthologies of Pacific Islands plays, *Théâtre océanien: Anthologie* (2011) and *Urbanesia: Four Pasifika Plays* (2012), are welcome additions to the corpus of published regional drama.

Théâtre océanien: Anthologie, edited and with translations by Sonia Lacabanne, breaks new ground by combining important francophone Pacific plays with new French translations of anglophone plays. Opening up

the variety of Pacific Islands drama to a francophone audience, the anthology surveys work by playwrights from Fiji, Rotuma, Hawai'i, New Caledonia, and Tahiti. Rather than concentrating on very recent drama, the collection includes plays staged between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, incorporating established works that might be considered classics of the Oceanian canon as well as lesser-known pieces receiving well-deserved recognition for the first time.

Of the plays originally composed in English, *Outcasts* (1989), by pioneering Fijian playwright Larry Thomas, presents a nuanced and uncompromising view of inhabitants of a squatter settlement struggling to get by in urban, postcoup Fiji. Employing the incisive social realism and critical reflection that has remained a hallmark of his playwriting, Thomas's early play draws careful attention to the dispossessed in our midst, while its tragic ending prompts its audience to ask tough questions about Fiji's socioeconomic discrepancies, attitudes to gender, and interracial conflicts. Alani Apio's *Kāmau* (1994) enacts a skillful anatomization of the personal and moral impact of the capitalist exploitation of Hawai'i's land and resources. Alika, a Native Hawaiian man, is offered a promotion when the hotel company for which he works buys the land his family occupies to make room for a new resort—a circumstance that puts Alika into direct conflict with his cousin Michael, whose livelihood is dependent on the local fishing grounds. Structured by fluid interactions between past and present, living and dead, and actors and spectators (including an interpel-

lation of the audience as tourists—an ironic acknowledgment of the commercial transaction of the theater itself), Apio's play proffers no easy answers, accentuating the intricacies of history's injustices and the uneasy relations of today.

Rotuman dramatist Vilsoni Hereniko's *The Last Virgin in Paradise* (*La dernière vierge du paradis*, 1991) represents a broader Pacific purview and a more comic tone. One of Oceania's best-known and most widely produced works, Hereniko's satire (based on a story told by Teresia Teaiwa) evokes the fictional South Pacific island of Marawa as a space of encounter for various characters who make and break Pacific Island stereotypes: a Harvard anthropologist studying sexual harassment, a European psychology professor on a junket to find a virgin bride, an Australian-educated Marawan trying to negotiate between native identity and colonial comforts, and a local "dusky maiden" who is more than she appears. Syncretizing languages, songs, dances, and rituals from a range of Pacific cultures, *Last Virgin* exemplifies the pan-Pacific theater aesthetic that has marked Hereniko's major contribution to regional playwriting.

In bringing these landmark works to a francophone readership, Lacabanne has made a significant contribution to the cross-cultural and translingual discourse on Pacific theater. Her translations include footnoted definitions and explanations that do not exist in the original editions and enhance the reader's understanding of the material. Yet the process of translation inevitably raises questions about the semiotic slippage that occurs when

culturally specific plays are re-rendered. While the works by Thomas, Apio, and Hereniko are largely “English-language” plays, they are not written in the same kind of English, nor are any of these varieties exclusively standard. Thomas’s Fiji English patois is central to the feel and rhythm of the world he depicts; changes of register punctuate and enliven Hereniko’s drama; and Apio’s use of Pidgin (Hawaiian Creole English) is integral to the identity of play and playwright and conveys important information about the characters’ affiliations and affects. Lacabanne’s measured translations tend to present the texts in something much closer to standard French, lending them a different air of formality and homogeneity. From a practical perspective, this more neutral approach is a sensible compromise, yet it is interesting to consider how these new cultural products will read and play for French-speaking consumers.

Théâtre océanien also contains two francophone plays that, to date, have not been translated into English. Previously published in French and Italian, *Les dieux sont borgnes* (*The Gods are Blind/One-Eyed*, 2002), a collaboration between two of New Caledonia’s premier dramatists, Pierre Gope and Nicolas Kurtovitch, resonates with Hereniko’s pan-Pacific references, theme of cross-cultural encounter, and style of “serious comedy.” In this reinvention of Pacific history for contemporary social purposes, Gope and Kurtovitch juxtapose a condensed and fantastic account of British explorer Captain Cook’s landfall and deification with scenes of a modern Kanak community trying to gain management of a fishery to

advance self-determination efforts, only to be sold out by their chief. In cross-referencing the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, Cook’s troubled role as a “god” becomes a metaphor for contemporary political “gods” of New Caledonia who abuse their power at the expense of ordinary people—and for whom Cook’s eventual death is a timely warning. Valérie Gobrait’s *Le partage de la terre* (*The Sharing of the Land*, 2001) appears here in print for the first time, a decade after its first production in te reo Tahiti (the Tahitian language). Like Thomas, Gobrait pursues an intimate, realist dramaturgy, treating the intergenerational gaps and conflicts that emerge when an elderly widower tries to arrange a family meeting to bequeath the family property to his three sons (an overworked civil servant, an unemployed alcoholic voyeur, and a drug-dealing delinquent). While punctuated with boisterous physical humor reminiscent of traditional Tahitian sketch comedy, the overall tone is thoughtful, presenting a critical picture of modern island life under French colonialism and questioning how heritage and genealogy are valued in the present day.

In bringing together Pacific works from different cultural, geographic, and linguistic archives, *Théâtre océanien: Anthologie* enables an appreciation of the plays’ shared investments and approaches as well as their distinctive cultural considerations and dramaturgical techniques, highlighting the diversity of regional playwriting over the past twenty-five years. Beyond its two-page preface, the collection would have benefited from more critical and contextual

commentary on each author and play, especially given the unfamiliar nature of much of this material. A list of characters for each drama would also have been a helpful orienting device. Nevertheless, the anthology represents a notable step forward in the publication of Pacific drama with a regional purview, especially since an English-language volume with an equivalent scope has yet to be compiled.

Whereas most of the plays in *Théâtre océanien: Anthologie* explore issues of indigenous identity in local sites, *Urbanesia: Four Pasifika Plays* collates several works by non-Māori Pacific Island playwrights based in Aotearoa/New Zealand, drawing indigeneity and diaspora into a more sustained and mutually engaging frame. Edited by David O'Donnell, the volume is the first to offer a conspectus of the burgeoning corpus of Pasifika playwriting produced in New Zealand since the 1990s, speaking to New Zealand both as an increasingly multicultural Pacific country and as a primary base for regional artistic production. While all four plays (which appear in print for the first time) are marked by tensions between Western and Pacific Island cultures in modern New Zealand, their concerns go beyond the local to refer to other nodes of the Pacific. Although each play features the city of Auckland as a setting, the "Urbanesia" of the title might define not only New Zealand's largest Polynesian center but also any metropolitan milieu where Pasifika energies are gathered and generated. Similarly, while all of the playwrights featured here share Samoan descent, indicating the predominance of Samoan practitioners in New Zea-

land's diasporic demographic and Pasifika theater scene, the artists' genealogies and the plays' subjects connect the subtleties of Samoan culture to a broader range of backgrounds and situations, suggesting the overlapping cultural complexities of life in the contemporary Pacific.

The collection opens with *A Frigate Bird Sings* (1996) by David Fane, Oscar Kightley, and Nathaniel Lees, a groundbreaking work of the mid-1990s, fresh from its 2012 remount at the Auckland Theatre Company and duly updated to reflect current technological and popular culture references. Its powerful and poignant portrait of Vili, a young Samoan fa'afafine in present-day Auckland, reveals how issues of sociocultural readjustment are exacerbated by the complexities of gender. Through a shifting series of scenes marking Vili's passage from youth to adulthood, the play traces the subtle contours of Vili's existence, highlighting the contradictions between family obligations and the desire to find love and freedom on his/her own terms, the difficulties of knowing what kind of self to perform, and the pain of being misunderstood, all of which lead to an entangled ending that refuses any neat resolution. The frigate bird—beautiful and ugly, revered and feared, rare and lonely—operates here as a potent metaphor for fa'afafine but also has relevance for many of the characters in this finely woven play.

Themes of sexuality, self-presentation, and stereotype versus reality are taken up in a different way in Victor Rodger's contemporary revenge tragedy, *My Name Is Gary Cooper* (2007). In a clever integration of form

and content, Rodger's play employs a cinematic structure that cuts between Sāmoa of the 1950s and 1960s, Los Angeles of the 1970s, and Auckland in 2000 to reveal the vengeance enacted by a Samoan man, Gary Cooper, on the family of the US film photographer who impregnated his mother during the shooting of the 1953 Cooper movie, *Return to Paradise*, and then abandoned her to prostitution and suicide. Darkly erotic, and by turns comic and disturbing, the inscription of Hollywood on the Pacific, and vice versa, is played out in painful and subversive ways and with unexpected implications.

Taro King (2002), by Vela Manusaute, offers new insights into regional connections beyond the Sāmoa/New Zealand dyad in a lively play that interweaves serious social commentary with broad physical comedy, dance, cabaret, Bollywood, and rap. The primary plot is activated by the international impact of the 2000 George Speight coup in Fiji, when New Zealand's trade sanctions dry up the supply of Fijian taro to an Auckland supermarket, imperiling the jobs of Samoan taro cutter Filipo and his Fiji Indian coworker Raj. The crisis abates, but tensions persist when Filipo is denied a management promotion in favor of Raj, due to the preferences of the Indian supermarket boss. The comic denouement, however, offers hope: Filipo decides to return to Sāmoa to farm taro, while Raj takes the management job to gain experience for a new supermarket business that Filipo will supply. Here, taro as a gastronomical and cultural staple of Pacific Island life functions as a medium of exchange that cements

alliances between peoples from different Pacific diasporas.

The pulsing energies of Urbanesia form the backdrop to the last play in the volume, *Rushing Dolls* (2011) by Courtney Sina Meredith, which focuses on young, creative, and trail-blazing Pacific women who face the world with a new confidence, political impetus, and global view. Cousins Cleo and Sia Felise traverse the hip sites of cosmopolitan Auckland—educated, talented, and with international dreams. Shifting between sharp, edgy dialogue and lyrical performance poetry (Meredith's other calling), the play offers refreshing characterizations that dismiss gendered and racialized stereotypes while performing a canny interrogation of the pleasures and pressures of ambition.

O'Donnell's edition provides readers with full biographies of each playwright and valuable testimonies from the artists about the genesis and development of their plays. Cast lists and information about each play's first production are useful additions for general readers as well as students, literature scholars, theater historians, and directors. Taken together, *Urbanesia: Four Pasifika Plays* and *Théâtre océanien: Anthologie* demonstrate the variegated themes, dramaturgical styles, and social investments of contemporary Pacific Islander playwrights in ways that are mutually invigorating. A next step for play publishing might involve a pan-Pacific anthology that covers a greater number of sites, works, and languages, and that makes a more holistic statement about theatrical output across Oceania. In the meantime, these two anthologies advance the visibility of Pacific Islands

drama in local and international arenas and help reinforce our appreciation of this body of work as a rich and dynamic component of contemporary world theater.

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The Missing King, by Moetai Brotherson. Translated by Jean Anderson. Auckland: Little Island Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-877484-22-3, ix + 375 pages, notes, glossary. NZ\$35.00.

“Will you take me for a madman, a compulsive liar, or just a drug addict having hallucinations?” asks Moanam Vaki Heremanu Vaikau, the mute protagonist and narrator of Tahitian novelist Moetai Brotherson’s *The Missing King*. “I’ve tried to be honest with you. I’ve told you everything, everything that made my life what it has been, my few moments of happiness, and of great distress” (251). Vaki’s question about the reception of what he calls his “treasure,” “the story of my life, that I’ve been putting together since the age of seven” (246), attests to how mysterious and improbably calamitous his life has been. Indeed, when Philippe, a French psychologist, attempts to publish Vaki’s manuscript as a memoir, it is soundly rejected; after recategorizing the exact book as fiction, Philippe receives twenty-four publication offers. In its exploration of the boundaries around history and fiction, Brotherson’s novel thus reads as a metafictional engagement with the process of writing as a never-ending performance of identity in the French Pacific indigenous context.

Brotherson’s novel was first published in French in 2007 as *Le roi absent* (Papeete: Au Vent des îles), and this 2012 English translation is by Jean Anderson, who brought fellow Tahitian author Chantal Spitz’s *Island of Shattered Dreams* (2007) to anglophone readers. The language of *The Missing King* comes across as one of this translation’s most engaging aspects; it is a testament to Anderson’s range and dedication to the cultivation of Tahitian literature that these two novels are vastly different in tone and style. Indeed, with this author and translator, I was reminded of an interview with the father of contemporary Tahitian writers, poet and author Henri Hiro, whose literary provocation centered the place of writing in an age of vital renewal: “For this renewal to continue, Polynesians must write. . . . It doesn’t matter what language they use, whether it’s reo mā’ohi [Tahitian], French, or English. The important thing is that they write, that they do it! And I think that in a short while we will have Tahitian authors—authors free of insecurities and able to express who we are!” (*Varua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia* [2006, 72, 81]).

The reader will be charmed by Vaki as he stumbles through life with his muteness, which he fervently refuses to see as a disability. Faced with abounding adversities, he responds in earnest with naive methods of inquiry, which often lead to surprising discoveries. For instance, when diagnosed with asthma, Vaki turns to one of his favorite authorities, the *Larousse French Dictionary*: “I looked up asma, azma, assma, all in vain, and then by accident I came across ‘asthma.’ What