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# Power and Privilege: The Role of the Reviewer in Responding to Indigenous Theatre

DIONE JOSEPH

### **Abstract**

Indigenous performance is powerful. While embracing commonalities, it can: dislocate dominant cultural constructions of reality, time and place; interrogate the distinctions between 'us' and 'them'; and carry the ability to refute cultural homogeneity. The latter is especially relevant when applied to critical analyses of Indigenous performance. These are often laced with challenges of power and privilege, for example: varying degrees of cultural awareness; a tendency to blur differences between Indigenous peoples and their creative works; an inclination towards what Rhoda Roberts calls the 'kindness approach'; and the persistence of Euro-centric aesthetics as the ultimate measure of success. How do reviewers respond to Indigenous performance from positions (real or perceived) of power and privilege, and how are these constructed when framing critical responses? Further, how are these responses complicated when the performance under review is by Indigenous peoples who are not of this place? This paper looks at what happened when *HART*, an Aboriginal Australian theatre work based on testimonials from the Stolen Generation was reviewed in New Zealand by predominantly Pākehā critics. It also examines how, as reviewers, we can develop a practice of robust criticism that offers an active and engaged response to Indigenous performance and, thereby, empowers the production of Indigenous performance to extend far beyond the walls of the theatre.

We are different and we are alike. More different than alike? Or more alike than different? Is the glass half full or half empty? Are you an Indian first or a woman first? What do you with the non-native part of your heredity when you identify yourself as a Native person? These questions are an exercise in reducing us to bite-sized pieces that make us more palatable to Western tastes, more acceptable to the foreigner's mindset. How many white artists are called to justify their influences? How many of them acknowledge or are even aware of how they have been influenced by us? The truth is that after 500 years of forced 'influence' of being denied the right to declare who we are and learning how to deny it ourselves, we are greater than the sum of our parts.<sup>1</sup>

Monique Mojica's words give me hope. As a woman of colour. As an artist. As a theatre critic. Her sheer determination and unflagging persistence remind me that we do have a place at the table and that our voices are meant to be heard in our own words, on our own terms. One of Mojica's favourite quotes or, perhaps, her necessary reminders, is from Audre Lourde: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'<sup>2</sup> This statement is included in the signature of Mojica's emails and is an inspiration for me as critic who writes and responds from a non-Eurocentric perspective. This position didn't arrive neatly packaged overnight. It accrued with a slow and occasionally bewildering unravelling of formal learning and a realisation that voices outside the dominant discourse have a right to be

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<sup>1</sup> Monique Mojica (1997) *Women's Voices in Native American Theatre*. Panel at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde (1988) *A Burst of Light, Essays*. London; Sheba Feminist Publishers.

authentic to who we are and from where we come – without apology and without justification.

This is my position as a critic. It is equally my position as a woman of mixed descent who engages with work at a diasporic level and from my own knowledge, experience and background. Let me begin with an example. Earlier this year Auckland's Basement Theatre welcomed Australian company She Said productions and their new work *HART*, written and performed by Noongar man Ian Michael. There was enormous support by the local community and especially from the local Māori theatre community for this Indigenous Australian work that came hot on the heels of rave reviews from Melbourne Fringe; however, not all the reviews of its production here in Auckland were so positive. The emphasis of this exploration, however, is not why the show received a particularly negative review; nor is it suggesting a how-to-respond guide to cultural works that are not of this place. Instead, this example offers an opportunity to engage with reviews and discuss the multiplicity of voices that diverse expressions can offer to the creatives as well as to audiences.

Reviewers' voices are part of an ongoing conversation. They have the potential to acknowledge the participants' journey in performatively engaging in making and re-making social space. In doing so, reviews can offer a socio-cultural and political commentary on a performance in ways that reflect the particular positions of their audiences and shape an understanding of the power of contemporary Indigenous performance.

Engaging with *HART* requires an engagement with the [hi]story of Indigenous Australian performance and the critical reception of Indigenous theatre in its native land. It also asks us to consider how we as New Zealanders, as non-Indigenous Australians, are placed to respond to this work. Where is our tūrangawaewae and where are the sharp and blurry edges of our responses? These questions remind us that long after the lights come up, the theatre emptied and the foyer only filled with

memories of chatter, the work continues to persist in the social realm. The inception of an idea, the creative process, the performance itself, the reviews and their legacy are all inscribed through a dynamic system of storytelling that facilitates acknowledgement and growth of multiple discourses on Indigenous performance.

In Australia, traditional storytelling techniques include song, dance, ritual, myth, story and, of course, oral narration. These have supported a sophisticated performance repertoire with a history of over 40,000 years, a legacy that continues to grow and expand. In Indigenous performance, navigating the world of story space offers an opportunity for the logic of history to be displaced and in turn, create new stories that contribute to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place.<sup>3</sup> However, while the past two decades of contemporary Australian Indigenous performance have achieved recognition within the Western theatrical framework, efforts to engage with the work outside Eurocentric conventions continues to be fraught.

For example, to refer to a production's aesthetics draws attention to the emotive technicalities of the setting, lights, sound, costume, bodies in space, and how these aspects reveal a sense of purpose and story. This collection of attributes is useful as a checklist for a reviewer familiar with the conventions of Western theatre, and therefore the standardized expectations of a society subject to a dominant ideological discourse; however, from an Indigenous or other non-Western perspective, this approach often fails to address a work's underlying social and political subjectivities. Within the context of Indigenous performance the inadequacy of the Eurocentric lens becomes even more acute. Indigenous ways of knowing offer layers of meaning that are produced by viscerally inscribed bodies, culturally identifiable images, objects, backdrops, and

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<sup>3</sup> Linda T. Smith (1999) *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (London; New York: Zed Books) 144.

costumes and by fusions of different styles. Within the Western lexicon such performative elements are seen as aesthetic features, yet within the socio-cultural matrix of Indigenous performance, they are so much more than a collection of notes and designs: they are emblematic of the values being transmitted by the creatives in articulating a particular social or cultural vision.<sup>4</sup>

*HART* offers a glimpse into a semi-chronological life span of four Indigenous men. These men are survivors of the Stolen Generation. In an interview following its opening in Auckland, Ian Michael reflected upon his work saying: 'These four stories are very separate but my stories and my experiences sharing these individual narratives are a product of everything these men went through'. He adds, 'Everything I do and every choice I make and how I'm treated is an effect of those legacies of the Stolen Generation and genocide and dispossession.'<sup>5</sup> This is the world of *HART*, a deeply personal, reflective and layered performance, and as an Indigenous performance not of this place, its reception in New Zealand is revealing of how our own practices and processes structure our socio-cultural responses. Reviews and interviews have the potential to recognise and affirm the power of Indigenous performance, however the wide and varied responses to *HART* when it was performed in New Zealand highlighted that there are still a number of different tensions when responding to Indigenous work from a non-Indigenous perspective. There were a total of five reviews to *HART*, including two responses by *Theatreview* (Auckland and Wellington), the *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), the *Dominion Post* (Wellington) and *Theatrescenes* (Auckland). Four of the

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<sup>4</sup> Maryrose Casey's conceptualisation of social aesthetics is a different approach to the one being proposed here but nevertheless shares certain overlapping concerns, particularly with reference to how aesthetics are located with specific 'cultural and experiential limits'. See Maryrose Casey, 'Conditions of recognition: Social aesthetics and Aboriginal Australian performance', in *Literature and Aesthetics* 23. 1 (2013) p. 92 - 109.

<sup>5</sup> Dione Joseph, 'Ian Michael', in *Australian Stage* (4 February 2016) <http://www.australianstage.com.au/features/international/ian-michael.html>.

reviews could be seen as positive or at least neutral, and one review was highly critical. Each of these reviews offers insights into how Indigenous performance is received here in Aotearoa and provokes exploration of some of the factors that can be seen to shape such responses. For example, the *Theatrescenes* reviewer, Matt Baker, announced that

as a white New Zealander of Anglo-Saxon descent who has never suffered the forced loss of my family let alone my identity, there is no way I can truly empathise, and I would argue it arrogant of me to claim otherwise, but as a practitioner presented with an artistic piece, I can sympathise.<sup>6</sup>

These comments, particularly the distinction made between empathy and sympathy and the deliberate distancing of the reviewer from the cultural material, form the basis for his following question: ‘Why was I so utterly bored?’ The reviewer’s disclaimer can be seen to be a genuine position statement, and the answer is suggested in a later comment that testimonies require ‘a firm yet subtle hand to dissect and structure them in the most theatrically compelling way’ – a perspective that reinforces the notion that the reviewer has preconceived expectations of how such work should be framed.

Such a response is symptomatic of the critical reception of Aboriginal theatre productions by non-Aboriginal audiences and can be seen since the very inception of Black theatre in Australia in the 1960s. The practice of reviewing in this way can be seen to reflect the cultural politics of its times and has evolved only slowly. According to Maryrose Casey, Australian theatre reviews in the 1970s ‘appear to be shaped by social and political intercultural narratives rather than aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> Matt Baker, ‘REVIEW: Hart (She Said Theatre)’, in *Theatre Scenes* (3 February 2016). <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-hart-she-said-theatre/>

response'.<sup>7</sup> At the time, readers were presumed to be mostly non-Indigenous, and reviewers writing for this readership analysed performances largely in terms that were indifferent to the particular values and voices of Indigenous Australians.

In the late 1990s, London School of Economics professor Kenneth Minogue observed: 'saturating Indigenous peoples in a mist of self-referential Western sympathy is merely one way in which we use them for the luxury of our own self-regard'.<sup>8</sup> Writing about the same time, Rhoda Roberts, Festival Director of the Indigenous program for the Sydney Olympics (2000) summarized the two predominant issues with how Australian cultural productions are judged and how the Australian community receives Indigenous cultural expression. The first involves what she terms the 'kindness approach', saying that 'the last thing we want is for the best of aboriginal art and theatre to be put into the charity basket',<sup>9</sup> while the second highlights the lack of cultural awareness in most reviews. As demonstrated in the reviews of *HART*, these issues persist.

On the surface it would seem that *The New Zealand Herald* offered a far more positive review. In an attempt to offer context, the review directs readers to Google's Australia Day homepage doodle this year (2016) that 'recognised the trauma of the Stolen Generations Indigenous Australian children who were forcibly removed from their families and placed in foster homes or institutions'.<sup>10</sup> It commends Michael's performance as 'reserved, quiet and dignified' with 'no cheap conjuring up of deep-seated

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<sup>7</sup> Maryrose Casey (2004) *Creating frames: contemporary Indigenous theatre 1967-1990* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press) 70.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by John Gardiner-Garden (1999) in 'From Dispossession to Reconciliation', Research Paper 27 1998-99: (Social Policy Group) <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1998-99/99rp27.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Rhoda Roberts (1997) Third Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture (Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 23 November 1997) <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/blacktheatre/story4.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Janet McAllister, 'Theatre review: Hart, Basement Studio' in *The New Zealand Herald* (4 February 2016). [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/theatre/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=343&objectid=11584234](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/theatre/news/article.cfm?c_id=343&objectid=11584234)

emotion for glib edification of an outside audience.<sup>11</sup> Michael is also praised for not loading his ‘spare, simple words’ with ‘misplaced histrionics’.<sup>12</sup> However, despite the author’s best intentions the context is skewed. Designed by Canberra based teen artist, Ineka Voigt, the doodle shows ‘A weeping mother [sitting] in an ochre desert, dreaming of her children and a life that never was... all that remains is red sand, tears and the whispers of her stolen dreamtime’.<sup>13</sup> Laced with noble sentiments of reconciliation and honouring the history of Indigenous Australians the image unfortunately comes across as tokenistic at best. Indigenous activist Sam Watson described the doodle as ‘enormously disrespectful’ and criticised the ‘very plastic caricatures’<sup>14</sup> of Indigenous people, once again highlighting that despite the intentions, romanticizing of Australia’s past still continues at the expense of Indigenous people.

Overall the comments from the *Herald* could be seen as favourable, yet as the review emphasizes, a differentiation is made: a binary of us and them that expects the response of what the reviewer calls the ‘outside audience’<sup>15</sup> to be homogenous in its expectations and receptions, thus compromising what could potentially be a nuanced and inclusive response.

The notion of bearing witness and testimony has functioned as a poetic form of socio-political meta-commentary since the late 1960s in Australia, but such work hasn’t always been met with the critical attention it merits. Whether through the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Chris Graham, ‘The world’s most popular website just ripped the rug out from under Australia Day’, in *The Insider: The Official New Matilda Blog* (26 January 2016).  
<https://newmatilda.com/2016/01/26/the-worlds-most-popular-website-just-ripped-the-rug-out-from-under-australia-day/>

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Chris Graham and Rozina Sabur, ‘Australia Day: Google Doodle met with criticism’, in *The Telegraph* (26 January 2016).  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2016/01/26/google-doodle-aboriginal-tribute-on-australia-day-wins-praise/>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



presence of family and relatives on stage, the narration of personal life experiences, the fusion of different styles to provide cabaret style entertainment or the incorporation of images and objects, testimonies are an important genre in the canon of Indigenous performance.<sup>16</sup> Christine Watson explains that testimonies 'from personal observation . . . present accounts of history through bodies so that the telling of stories is literally an embodiment of history'<sup>17</sup> while Helen Gilbert argues that giving witness in Indigenous theatre demonstrates the truth-value of testimonial and subjectivity in performance.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous performance and those who are involved in its creation are participants in an 'interconnected, intercultural and deeply subjective interactive experience'<sup>19</sup> and as a result, the language used to evaluate these performances must be challenged to transform the spaces into which our analyses are placed.

The review by Ewan Coleman, published in the *Dominion Post*, although brief, is generous: 'There is a deep sense of commitment from Michael, as he confidently animates his tales that have both humour and poignancy'.<sup>20</sup> Coleman locates the subject material of the performance firmly in the domain of the

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<sup>16</sup> A range of different productions employ witnessing from one of the earliest political revues *Basically Black* to Jack Davis' classic *No Sugar*, Jimmy Chi's musical *Bran Nue Dae* and Deborah Mailman's *Seven Stages of Grieving* and Jane Harrison's *Stolen*. More recently *Jack Charles vs the Crown* and *Big hART*'s large scale performance *Namatjira* also highlighted the absolute need for witnesses, witnessing and different forms of testimony.

<sup>17</sup> Christine Watson (2000) 'Believe me: Acts of Witnessing in Aboriginal Australian Women's Autobiographical Narratives', *Journal of Australian Studies* 24(64) 142.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Gilbert (2002) 'Embodied Knowledges: Technologies of Representation in a Postcolonial Classroom', *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi (eds) (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang) 326.

<sup>19</sup> Liza-Mare Syron (2005) *Ephemera: Aboriginality, reconciliation, urban perspective; Artistic practice in contemporary Aboriginal theatre* (MCA thesis, University of Wollongong) Accessed on 27 July 2013 <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=0&article=1317&context=theses&type=additional>

<sup>20</sup> Ewan Coleman, 'Theatre review: Hart', in *The Dominion Post* (22 February 2016). <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/culture/77117651/theatre-review-hart>

‘personal’ and notes that this saves it from becoming a ‘documentary-style presentation’.<sup>21</sup> These responses are also reflective of a particular understanding of Indigenous performance, one that limits testimonials and forms of witnessing to a particular genre of re-telling history rather than a mixture of comedy, tragedy and catharsis.

In contrast to the *Herald* and *Dominion Post* reviews, the Wellington-based *Theatreview* review by John Smythe is much longer and includes a range of excerpts from the show itself to offer context. As in the *Theatrescenes* review, Smythe also acknowledges his position, but this time as a personal stance that emphasizes his lack of knowledge in regards to the history of Indigenous Australians and the Apology that was given to the Stolen Generations in 2008. This was an occasion that he realises, ‘in retrospect ... came seven years after Labour Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stood in Canberra’s house of representatives.’<sup>22</sup> Smythe, who is also the editor of *Theatreview*, describes the performance as ‘heartfelt and compelling in its unavoidable authenticity: an impressionistic representation of countless lives which reverberate with endless repercussions that resonate enough ... to command our empathy’.<sup>23</sup> These comments and the sustained engagement with the work also offer another perspective that is simultaneously inclusive but distant, reflecting an emotional tussle with a work that despite its geographical proximity has a very different story to that of this land.

My review of *HART* adds to the voices responding to this work. For the interview in *Australian Stage*<sup>24</sup> I began by reflecting upon Australia’s long history of oppression against

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Smythe, ‘An impressionistic representation’ in *Theatreview* (21 February 2016).  
<http://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=8864>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Dione Joseph, ‘Ian Michael’, in *Australian Stage* (4 February 2016)  
<http://www.australianstage.com.au/features/international/ian-michael.html>.

Aboriginal peoples and the ongoing struggle for reparations and equality. It was an introduction that should not have been needed; yet I believed it was still vital for the Australian audience to come face-to-face with a history that was often discounted, negated and repudiated by institutions and government. In contrast, in my *Theatrereview* review<sup>25</sup> of the Auckland performance, I felt it was important to contextualise my discussion of *HART* by recognising the power of the Treaty in shaping relations between Māori and Pākehā in spite of ongoing negotiations and challenges. Having lived and worked as a theatre artist in Australia for six years, my contextual understanding has been informed – privileged, really – by the opportunities I have had to witness Australian theatre and engage directly with Aboriginal theatre artists. This too is woven through the fabric of my reviews.

Reviews are often judged as good or bad, but these binaries are not useful. If anything, they distract from the much larger conversation that is required: a broad and in-depth dialogue that enables and empowers multiple voices to be heard in an inclusive space and can respond to not just to the work but to the socio-political environment in which it is made. Reviews provide a platform for discussing storylines and positioning ourselves within that context in order to enable the identification and deconstruction of dominant ideological positions and the alternative stories about peoples and places in ways that can run counter to mainstream discourse.

In the *Australian Stage Interview*, Ian Michael says that 'It's really important to hear these voices'. He goes on: 'Often men don't really want to talk about the things that happened to them and as this show is a verbatim work, we don't say what these men don't say – because in actual fact, they don't say a lot'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dione Joseph, 'Stories that deserve to be told and need to be heard, *Theatrereview* 3 February 2016  
<http://www.theatrereview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=8791>.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Dione Joseph, 'Ian Michael', in *Australian Stage* (4 February 2016).  
<http://www.australianstage.com.au/features/international/ian-michael.html>.

Indigenous artists are often seen to perform their own words, and in so doing their voices enter into states of ‘dynamic exchangeability’<sup>27</sup> where through testimonies performers can vocalize their responses in a space that invites a range of other conversations to begin, both with the immediate audiences but also with the wider Australia – and as in this case, with international audiences. ‘They don’t say they were molested, or raped or abused – they don’t say those things because it’s too hard,’ said Michael, adding: ‘Men sharing these stories through their testimonies is the first step of healing, but being able to share those stories allows us as a community to heal and in turn allow other people to heal as well.’

By creating markers, concrete and abstract indicators of intervention, reviews are active sites responsible for re-shaping our imaginings of personal and communal stories. Performances are a way for stories to travel, and they also travel, often circulating widely beyond their original sites and audiences. Margaret Sommerville argues that these stories

do not exist, or inform, our school curricula and are elusive even in informal and community learning spaces. Fundamentally pedagogically they have a critical role to play in changing the way we think and in developing new place literacies.<sup>28</sup>

As Michael says: ‘The truth and the honesty of verbatim theatre is its hallmark’, and adds ‘It’s not fiction these are real human experiences – you cannot escape the truth.’<sup>29</sup> How then, can we, as New Zealanders, grow our range of responses and

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<sup>27</sup> See Gilles Deleuze & Guattari, Félix (1977) *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, New York: Viking Press.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Somerville (2007) Place Literacies *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 163

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Dione Joseph, ‘Ian Michael’, in *Australian Stage* (4 February 2016). <http://www.australianstage.com.au/features/international/ian-michael.html>

develop our reviewing practices in ways that can support a reflectively Indigenous, performative retelling of stories and with these a remaking of place?

Whether reviewers or audience members, N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa poet and writer, offers an apt reminder when engaging with Indigenous performance:

We know who we are (and where we are) only with reference to the things about us, the points of reference in both our immediate and infinite worlds, the places and points among which we are born, grow old and die. There is in this simple cartology the idea of odyssey. And in odyssey there is story. Nothing is older than story in our human experience. Nothing appeals more to our human being.<sup>30</sup>

Reviews are stories. Interviews are stories. By acknowledging the stories we are *told* in light of the stories we *tell*, as reviewers we can show how stories are generated through journeys by individuals and communities. We can enable the identification and deconstruction of dominant ideological positions and place alternative stories appropriately against the backdrop of mainstream discourse. In doing so, we can offer a platform to reflect upon how embodied narrative and performed discourse connect people with their own, and each other's lived lives, directly and immediately. This, in turn, facilitates an understanding that is cognisant of power and privilege and our role in responding to Indigenous Performance through awareness, genuine engagement and authenticity to who we are and where we come from. This, after all, is our story too.

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<sup>30</sup> K Kavanagh (2005) citing Momaday, 1995: 'The whole land is sacred' – story and the Navajo sense of place. In Backhaus, G., and Murungi, J. (eds) *Lived Topographies and their Mediational Forces*. Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, 31.

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**Dione Joseph** is a theatre practitioner with a professional and academic background in the performing arts. Working from a community and cultural engagement position, she has been professionally involved in the arts over the past ten years. She directed and dramaturged a range of works and has published extensively as a stage critic and arts journalist. She has

travelled internationally to China, Canada, Austria, the UK and USA on various residencies, fellowships and community invitations and this has led to an expanding body of scholarship in a range of different areas with an emphasis on Indigenous performance. She holds an MA in Community and Cultural Development from Victorian College of the Arts.