



Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania

Review by TROY MCVEY

Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania by Diana Looser. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. 328 pp. \$55.00.

This 28th entry in the Pacific Islands Monograph series blends theater and performance studies approaches with historiography as well as the perspectives of Pacific studies and post-colonial studies. Diana Looser's work is a significant addition that fills a void the discipline of theater did not realize existed until the early twenty-first century. *Remaking Pacific Pasts* is both a primer on Pacific Island identity and post-colonial theory as well as a foundational work in the field of Pacific Theater. This monograph is subtitled *History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania*, as Looser chooses to study plays "less concerned with representing history than engaging it" (Looser 2014, 15). This examination highlights plays performed in Hawai'i, Aotearoa/New Zealand, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Looser works at "showing how local play production has worked to facilitate processes of creative nation building and the construction of modern regional imaginaries" (2). Further, a distinction is drawn between drama and performing arts. "Although many Pacific Island cultures have a broad range of highly evolved indigenous performance forms, including oral narrative, dramatic performance, ritual, dance, and song, scripted drama is a relatively recent phenomenon" (3). There is a balanced discussion on the overlapping regional identities of the Pacific, the Pacific Rim, the Pacific Basin, the Asia-Pacific Region, and the United Nations-preferred term, Oceania. The region defined in this work used the words Pacific and Oceania interchangeably to discuss Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia (4). She does not examine drama in Australia, because there are different linguistic roots and the colonial/post-colonial development of Australia is different from even its neighbor New Zealand. Philosophically, Looser draws on the concept of the "ideological brotherhood" of the Pacific Way, which she credits for the development of the University of the South Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (5).

The first chapter, "The Drama and Theater of Oceania" provides an overview of post-colonial dramatic literature and theatre production in Oceania while the remaining four chapters focus on thematic case studies. Papua New Guinea is addressed first as the work produced in the 1960s/70s makes this one of the earliest sites for post-colonial drama to develop. Explored are student texts from the University, heavily dependent on Western techniques, but nationalistic in nature. Also explored are the less-Western-influenced work by Theatre New Guinea, and other groups, who were more reflective of indigenous morals, stories, and styles of presentation. By the 1980s, as national independence brought about the development of the National Theatre Company

and Raun Raun Theatre, there was much exciting work being produced. Looser finds that the early promise of Papua New Guinea theater has not been fulfilled in the past two decades, however (35). She also posits that Papua New Guinea's theater had impact throughout Melonesia, especially in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, namely at the Wan Smolbag Theatre.

The section on theater in Fiji is brief, exploring more localized "pre-coup" texts with the plays written after the May 1987 coups, which Looser explains deal primarily with the ramifications of the coups. The plays of Vilsoni Hereniko are each summarized, particularly those making a later appearance in Hawai'i.

The survey through the Pacific moves into the French colonies of New Caledonia and Tahiti, both of which have large indigenous populations. First, the artifacts of Kanak cultural expression are discussed, then the work of other indigenous groups, demonstrating how these playwrights "have activated culturally specific concerns and materials while also speaking to historical and contemporary themes that resonate on regional levels" (47).

Hawaiian theatre history is broken up into pre-Second World War historical pageant plays; a local indigenous theater movement in the 1970s characterized by John Kneubuhl's plays at the Honolulu Community Theater, and Edward Sakamoto and Darrel H Y Lum's plays written in that unique Hawaiian-English hybrid "pidgin" language; and works from the Hawaiian diaspora in the United States, particularly Leilani Chan's solo performance work in Los Angeles. Looser identifies Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl as one of Hawai'i's leading playwrights (51), and introduces some of the plays that will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four.

Readers of this journal will be interested to know that almost an entire page (53) is devoted to the Chamoru theatre of Guam, drawing on scholarly work produced by Peter Onedera for the University of Guam Micronesian Studies program (290). The significant works identified are *Ai Hagâ-hu!*, produced at the University in 1997 and *Nasarinu*, performed in 1999. Robert Underwood's 1985 *Guaha Taotao Tano'*, Guam's entry to the Festival of the Pacific Arts, is credited as the first full-length-Chamoru-language play.

The section on Aotearoa/New Zealand begins with the statement that theater here "comprises the most sustained and prolific output in the contemporary Pacific region" (54). Some of this is due to the large population and land mass and the extensive higher education system. It is also here that the colonial/indigenous identities are most complicated, with works produced by the Pākehā, or European New Zealanders, as well as by the indigenous groups, most notably the Māori, and as well as immigrant Pacific Islanders (Pasifika), such as the Samoans. Looser traces the Aotearoa theater history from plays written in the 1970s by Māori playwrights in English through more mature, bicultural presentations in the 1980s (as well as works in this decade that focused on presenting the detriments of colonialism) to attempts in the 1990s to redefine Māori plays and playwrights with more sophisticated adaptations or reinterpretations of western theatrical canon as well as more plot-driven Māori scripts. After the turn of the century, theater and drama continued to expand, and plays in the Māori language were established and popularized by the Taki Rua Theatre's Te Reo Māori tours. This section is particularly fast-moving, with only passing mention of each innovative change in drama. Chapter Three analyses three Māori plays more deeply. The last section of the chapter, "On the Move: Diasporic Pacific Islands Theater in Aotearoa and Beyond" appropriately explores the work of the New Zealand Pasifika, with a focus on works produced by immigrant Samoans and theater groups such as Taotahi ma Uo, Pacific Theatre, and the Pacific Underground. Makerita's Urale's 1997 *Frangipani Perfume* is highlighted as the first play written by a Pacific Islander woman with an all-woman cast. Albert Wendt's 2003

The Songmaker's Chair is discussed as an example of a successful Somoan diasporic piece presented in Hawai'i, opening a conversation on the "expanded world" of Oceania (63).

Chapter Two examines seminal cross-cultural encounters, particularly those with Captain James Cook. Looser begins with a brief historical summary of Cook's Pacific voyages, followed by a discussion on how the lasting impact of the Cook's encounters is reflected and has evolved in post-colonial contexts throughout the Pacific, drawing extensively from the work of Diana Taylor to show the malleable and evolving cultural perspectives demonstrated by the case studies (73).

The first case is a play by Australian-born Dennis Carroll with native Hawaiian Tammy Haili'opua Baker, produced by the Kumu Kahua Theatre in Hawai'i in 1998, entitled *Way of a God*, the English translation of the Hawaiian name of where his ship took anchor, Kalakekua Bay (74). Looser's analysis is deep and rich, as it is with all of the case studies, truly blending historical and political context of the original time period, as well as the time period the play was presented, the dramatic structure and themes in the text, and linguistic analysis of lines in the play. Her reading of *Way of a God* is as nuanced as the play itself, trying to delve into the psychology of Cook while exposing the indigenous political and culture struggles in an attempt to objectively reposition the traditional narrative.

The next case is a play written by New Caledonian playwrights Pierre Gope and Nociolas Kurtovitch in 2002, entitled *Les dieux sont borgnes (The Gods Are Blind/One-Eyed)*. Looser presents this as a post-modern reading, rather than a historical play, combining elements of song and dance from African, Oceanic and European traditions with clowning techniques, deliberate use of anachronisms, and dark, minimalist scenery. She points to *Les dieux sont borgnes* as an example of French work flourishing in the Pacific, and for "creating a new myth of Cook that enables relevant social critique" (95).

The last case in this chapter is the oratorio *Orpheus in Rarohenga*, commissioned for the Orpheus Choir of New Zealand in 2002, later revived by the choir and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in 2013 (96). Poet Robert Sullivan was the librettist and John Psathas the composer. Sullivan's libretto was later published as a verse drama, *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (96). Looser views *Orpheus in Rarohenga* as an example of transculturation because it tells the story from Māori perspectives using Greek mythology and German musical traditions. Sullivan also borrows from Jungian psychology in his presentation of Cook (100). After extensive text analysis, Looser postulates that if the main theme of the *Orpheus* was "to figure Cook as an 'integrated whole,' then the same might be said for the Pacific" (109). She concludes the chapter with more discussion on viewing Oceania as a complex, unified region with mention of some other theatrical accounts of Cook's contacts.

The third chapter, "Revisiting 'Tino Rangatirantanga in Action'" delves into five Māori theatrical interpretations of the New Zealand Wars. *Tino rangatirantanga* loosely translates as "self-determination" (112), so the title borrows from Roma Potiki's 1991 affirmation that Māori theater is self-determination in action (111). Looser chooses her Māori case studies by exploring five plays dealing aspects of the New Zealand wars fought in the 1840s – 70s. The first case is, in fact, the first produced Māori play, *Te Raukura: The Feathers of the Albatross*, written by Harry Dansey in 1972. The second case is an experimental piece produced by Paul Maunder and the Theatre of the Eighth Day collective in 1985, entitled *Ngāti Pākeha: He Kōrero Whakapapa*. The third case is Aprina Taylor's *Whāea Kairau: Mother Hundred Eater*, a 1995 post-colonial reworking of Bertolt Brecht's 1939 seminal post-modern war epic *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Next is Witi Ihimaera's 2000 production of *Woman Far Walking* and David Geary's 2010 *Mark Twain and Me in Māoriland*. Looser's comparative analysis is intended to reveal

themes of Māori identities, the evolution of Māori post-colonial cultural viewpoints, and maturation of theater in Aotearoa. It is interesting to note that a majority of the featured playwrights are female, demonstrating a Pacific sensibility on gender equality not necessarily shared outside the region.

Chapter Four focuses on one single Hawaiian playwright, Victoria Nalana Kneubuhl, also female. Looser is again thorough in contextualizing Kneubuhl's career and accomplishments, beginning with her career as a museum curator, placing her as part of the "Hawaiian Renaissance" of the 1970s and one of the first acknowledged "Pacific playwrights," an important descriptor, distinguishable from using Asia-American or Native American (165). The first play explored is the 1988 production of *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu*, which deals with the queen regent's conversion to Christianity. The play began as a living history (museum) enactment that blossomed into a stage play, underscoring Kneubuhl's transformation from museum curator to playwright and social/cultural activist. The next play examined is *Emmalehua*, originally produced in 1986 and revised in 1996, set in post-Second-World War Hawai'i, with a heroine forced to choose either to maintain a Hawaiian identity or a more colonized American identity. In 1986, Victoria's uncle, John Kneubuhl, directed the production and changed the ending to one that privileged a male, American perspective, without Victoria's permission (176). Dennis Carroll directed the 1996 version, produced after her Uncle passed away, and restored Victoria's original ending, favoring a pro-Hawaiian, female perspective. The last of Victoria Kneubuhl's plays to be examined is *January, 1893*, produced in 1993 as part of the 'Onipa'a Centennial Observance of the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani. Again, Looser's critical examination is thorough and balanced, and late in this chapter, Looser begins to tie together the major *Remaking Pacific Pasts* themes of history, memory, and place as she describes the tremendous production and reaction, casting the living history and play production as nearly as momentous as the historical event. The chapter concludes with a re-examination of the power of theater and the potent issues of colonial trauma.

On that note, the fifth chapter examines Fijian plays that re-envision the 1987 coups d'état. The three selected plays are each told from a different cultural perspective, with authors from different ethnic groups. Vilsoni Hereniko's one-act allegory, *The Monster*, was completed in 1987, while Hereniko was still working on his dissertation at the University of the South Pacific (202). *The Monster* examines racial tensions between Fijians and Indians, and has the protagonists together vanquishing an external friend/foe, leading to a feeling and understanding of unity. Looser notes that the play takes on a more philosophical and distant perspective, so may in fact be more insightful than other versions (203). The next play is *Ferringhi*, written in 1993 by Fijian Sudash Mishra, who had Indian ancestors. Mishra was also a scholar affiliated with USP. The performance feature Mishra himself in the title role. Looser's discussion of the cultural artifacts is measured, and she engages in thought-provoking debate with the playwright-scholar's own opinions on the work. The last play is Larry Thomas's *To Let You Know*, written in 1997. Thomas is of mixed Fijian / European ancestry, and identified in this text as Fiji's leading playwright and filmmaker. This performance opened ten years to the day after the coups and explores the lack of progress for the people, the indigenous people of Fiji in that decade (227). The theatrical elements of this play are discussed more in depth as important statements to the central theme, fleshed out by heavy reliance on testimonial addresses by the characters. Looser credits Thomas' work as being the most prophetic (234).

In her summary and comparative analysis of the three plays, Looser states, "In drawing attention to a contemporary social crisis and registering its complicated legacies in challenging theatrical forms, *The Monster*, *Ferringhi*, and *To Let You Know* are important examples of the

aesthetic, political, and historiographic intercessions that theater continues to make in the postcolonial Pacific” (235), lending more support to her main argument about the living nature of Pacific Theater.

Looser acknowledges three significant academic works dealing with the drama of Oceania. These are Christopher Balme’s *Pacific Performances*, Joseph Roach’s *City of the Dead*, and Astrid Betz’s *Die Inszenierung der Südsee (The Production of the South Seas)* (12). The appendix of plays identifies approximately two hundred works in the Pacific and Oceania between 1969 and 2012 (244-260). While the references are thorough and exhaustive, there are only a dozen or so texts, many of these reviews in local newspapers, specifically targeted to Pacific performance (275-298). This work, then, is a significant contribution to the field, especially considering that twenty years ago, in the *History of the Theatre* by the preeminent American, world, and western theatre historian Oscar Brockett, there was not a single mention of Pacific Theater (Brockett 1995).

Diana Looser’s *Remaking Pacific Pasts* concludes with an epilogue that clearly articulates and reinforces her sub-textual themes of return and revision and she argues that the comparative nature of her exploration adds credence to the commonalities of Pacific cultures and urges the reader to contextualize a “New Oceania.” In her vision for future pathways for research, she sees both a corpus more centered on Pacific viewpoints rather than through colonial filters, as well as theater and drama conversing with the other art forms with a new sense of indigenous authority. Her thorough and thoughtful work sets forth an ambitious model for future scholars to follow.

References

- Brockett, Oscar. 1995. *History of the Theatre*, 7th edition. Boston: Allyn and Brown.
- Looser, Diana. 2014. *Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.