

Tuia, tui, tuia: A performance exercise in hybridity in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Introduction

Every year the Vocal Studies Department (classical) at the University of Auckland, School of Music produces a voice class concert. The concert includes art song performances, opera scenes and arias, and occasionally music theatre pieces. This is aligned with the training offered by the School of Music, which was founded on the traditional European conservatory model¹. The courses within the performance degree structure are designed to develop and enhance the skill set necessary to deliver accurate and authentic interpretations of art music from the Western European tradition. While New Zealand is a land predominantly populated by descendants of Britain and Western European countries, the context for delivery of these courses is far from the source of those traditions.

Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand is the most densely populated Polynesian city in the world and is 18,353 kilometres from London. The thriving resurgence of indigenous Māori culture², the increasing significance of minority Pacific Island immigrants and their descendants³ and the increase in Asian immigrants from around the Pacific Rim⁴ have resulted in an ethnically diverse population whose cultures and non-western worldviews are redefining education and artistic practice reflecting “contemporary living” in Aotearoa⁵/New Zealand rather than a “direct expression” of a colonial past (Nicholas, 2006, p. 18). This is a challenge for those who teach the performance practices of western music but also an opportunity for innovative educators, who recognise the worth of the knowledge of small-

¹ As stated in the history section of the School of Music, in the 2008 review document of the Bachelor of Music degree at the University of Auckland.

² The first people to settle New Zealand, a land they called Aotearoa, and whose sovereignty and full authority over the land and water was guaranteed in a document called the *Treaty of Waitangi*, signed with the British Crown in 1840

³ According to the *Brief to incoming Minister of Pacific Island affairs* in November 2008, Auckland is expected to host 62 percent of New Zealand's population growth between 2006 and 2031, a sizeable proportion of which will be Pacific Islanders. The population is young with a birth-rate outstripping that of other groups. Projections are that by 2026 one in ten New Zealanders will be Pacific Islander.

⁴ According to the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, November 2008 statistics indicate the Asian population has the fastest growing rate within the immigrant population and it is projected to reach 16% of the resident population by 2026.

⁵ Aotearoa is an indigenous Māori word that loosely means land of the long white cloud. It has many romantic stories associated to its creation, and is used to refer to the whole of New Zealand by both indigenous and non-indigenous New Zealanders. Prior to colonisation Māori had no name for the entire country and the post-colonial usage of Aotearoa some historians claim, was initiated by Europeans.

scale non-western traditional societies in colonial or postcolonial situations (Kawharu, 1975, p3), to enrich their current education praxis with non-traditional tools.

Rationale

This research project addressed the diversity of artistic skills needed in the demanding profession of singing (Harrison, 2006 p. 194) by exploring the creative process of the other, in this case the dancer, who communicates with the body rather than the voice. In the collaborative dance and voice project *Tuia, tui, tuia*, the researcher hypothesised that by creating a workshop environment that invoked Bhabha's notion of third space (Rutherford 1990; Bhabha 1994; Bhabha 1996) the accumulated knowledge of the dancers and singers could be shared by weaving the sound-worlds and traditions of different disciplines and cultures. This knowledge transfer would create a unique performance outcome and extend the skill base of all participants.

Research Design and Methods

The research project drew on the experiences of degree-level dance studies students and degree-level voice class students. The 12 workshops progressed towards a performance outcome which expressed in narrative form the story of the class and the experiences of the participants. Embedded in the research design were Kaupapa Māori⁶ principles. In practice this meant that all workshop design would have at the core of their framework procedures appropriate to the indigenous Māori culture. In this way, the project was grounded in a South Pacific context where the predominant western perspective is not the only viable worldview.

Aims

The students worked together in three different educational contexts: (studio, workshop and performance) and in two power environments (peer knowledge exchange and expert tutelage). Within each discipline individual aims and objectives were defined. The singers explored the use of the body as an expressive instrument, extended creative units and investigated cultural identity through their artistic practice. The dance students developed an understanding and awareness of theory and practice of dance through perspectives of difference in the fields of identity, ancestry and intercultural contexts in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Harvey, 2008).

The Workshops

Framework

Through collaborative brainstorming, tasks were generated to encourage trans-disciplinary and intercultural knowledge exchange. Early in the workshop series, collaborative vocabulary was identified in order to meet an agreed understanding of discipline-specific words such as voice, dance, collaboration, embodiment, movement, sound and choreography.

The framework of the workshop structure drew on the philosophy of traditional indigenous schools of learning (Mead, 2003). Each workshop began with a blessing or ritual

⁶ Kaupapa in this sense is the underlying philosophy that shapes the principles. The philosophy draws on the accumulated knowledge base of generations of Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand.

prayer (karakia). All participants had the opportunity to lead the class in a blessing that revealed their artistic ancestry and was relevant to their upbringing. The purpose of this ritual was to unite and focus the participants on the collaborative task to follow.

The first three workshops were dedicated to tasks that encouraged students to consider the family influences that shaped their artistic and career choices. Participants were asked to choose two pieces of music which were meaningful for one of the following reasons: (a) you love it; it makes you smile or cry, it moves you; (b) you will never forget it, it carries a powerful sense of nostalgia for you; (c) you hate it, you can't stand it, you associate bad memories with it.

The following questions were used to guide their reflections: (a) why have you chosen to sing?; (b) Why have you chosen to dance?; (c) What and who has led you to this point and what has kept you going? The students used the questions to create a short speech (mihi) in which they shared their reflections in oral narratives supported by audio examples.

Feeding and Nourishing

The tutors and students shared cross-discipline information on technique and creative process through a series of interactive exercises which were subtitled, "Feeding and Nourishing". Because vocal health and the management of breath are fundamental to singers, exercises based around this knowledge were developed to kinaesthetically share this information with the dancers. Because dancers have an intimate knowledge of the body as an expressive instrument, tasks were created to share the theory of movement through practice.

One of the tasks that evolved out of the sharing of stories was led by the dance studies teaching assistant who had studied in Japan. Using a Butoh-influenced task and inspired by Emilyn Claid's *Full Body/Empty Body*, the exercise was to transform a memory or feeling into a piece of embodied art inclusive of movement and voice. The participants were asked to choose something that was cognitively meaningful and translate it into movement and/or sound. The objective was to distil an emotion from the shared stories. The participants improvised gestures and vocal sounds and experimented with translating them into a short movement or vocal phrase. This was the basis for creating movement and vocal metaphors from the stories and explored task-based choreography.

Breath was introduced to the dancers as a basic instinct and related to expression. Using the *Alexander Technique*⁷ and various *Feldenkrais*⁸-based movements participants were led, by the voice teaching assistant, to explore their bodies through the breath mechanism. Employing *Estill mode*⁹ sirens, vocal figures and vocal qualities to show emotion in voice, body and face, the task demonstrated how the voice can be affected by manipulation of the body. The focus of this task was to isolate the instrument that exists within the framework of the body and allow everyone to experience sound production and body movement together.

External expert tutors were utilised for cross-cultural and cross-genre workshops. The development of the workshop structure deliberately included a Samoan section that would have relevance to the Pacific context. The workshop discussed conflicting opinions around authenticity, sincerity and creativity with regards to cultural customs and traditions and the challenges of modern, urban, immigrant life and the hybrid forms of dance/song/movement which have developed as a result of globalisation. The discussion stimulated thoughts about the wider political implications and our own disciplines' traditions, roots and futures.

⁷ The Alexander Technique is an established posture-based method which helps a person discover a new balance in the body by releasing unnecessary tension.

⁸ An established movement-based method that aims to improve posture, coordination, flexibility and suppleness

⁹ The Estill training system trains the singer to associate certain "figures" or exercises with movement of different vocal muscles.

Structure of the Performance

The structure of the performance was shaped by the two teaching assistants, one from each discipline. Unconsciously they took a Māori concept, Take-Utu-Ea (Mead, 2003), and applied it to the theatre context. Essentially this concept comprises a disruption or forced imbalance to the natural order of life by an inappropriate action, followed by reciprocation (restoring of balance by exchange) until a resolution is reached. In theatrical terms the students identified this as “dilemma, turning point, discovery until a climax is reached and the dilemma resolved”.

The performance drew on all aspects of the workshop series. This included the use of the musical examples that the students had shared, the narratives that were created, the exercises that shared discipline knowledge and the songs and choreography that were learned.

Conclusion

By the end of the project the students had shared important knowledge of the other's discipline and obtained important skills for working in collaborative environments. The students had been challenged to write about and discuss dance and voice within the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand through different philosophical and cultural perspectives with a critical level of engagement. In collaboration, they had developed a performance piece with an awareness of ancestry, histories, personal positions and perspectives and learned to articulate his or her cultural position as it relates to the context of a range of cultures in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The structure of the performance demonstrated the uniqueness of the subject matter, which was based on the individual stories of the participants and workshop-initiated activities. The performance blended artistic disciplines, extended participants' creative units beyond their individual specialist topics and revealed authentic stories about the performers' artistic “roots”. The “other” was expressed not just in ethnic terms, but in musical terms, by the juxtaposition of waiata¹⁰, Italian aria and contemporary artists and in dance terms, with the juxtaposition of Samoan, classical choreography, modern dance and improvisation.

¹⁰ Māori song.

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