



Journeys and strangers:  
touring Māori theatre

In Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, hospitality is one of the major themes. It's illustrated most clearly by the central character, Odysseus, who kills a man for not following the correct rules of receiving a guest. Ultimately, he takes revenge on the suitors who have come to take his place as king for abusing the hospitality that was granted to them.

In traditional Māori culture, it was seen as an honour to host – and host lavishly. And you could expect the same treatment when you visited. In modern times hospitality, to care for your guests, is still an important virtue although, from my own experience in theatre, time and money restrict lavish receptions. Acknowledging guests and welcoming them is usually more than enough.

This chapter looks at some of the issues concerned with the hosting and touring of Māori performing arts companies. The knowledge I have gained should be seen as the definitive way to host, or tour a Māori production and each company should follow its own protocols.

To host and look after your visitor, and in turn for the visitor to respect their host and their rules, is simply what is required by any two groups coming together. So it is with Māori and Māori theatre. As an example, if strangers burst into your house, you may welcome them, but if they do not acknowledge you as the owner, then you might want to ask them to leave. And if you invite people to your house and immediately leave them to their own devices, they might not return.

The groups with which I've been involved have followed a method that's anchored in Māori tikanga (protocol).

This protocol may be seen as the basis of many Māori groups who may come into your theatre and your area.

Some groups are strict in adhering to karakia (prayer) and following tikanga. This may be due to the material they are dealing with or it may be requested by the kaumatua (elder), who is a part of their group. Most Māori groups I've been involved with include kaumatua and many touring groups you host will also have a kaumatua involved. Very often, the kaumatua's role is to give cultural and spiritual advice; act as go-between and first point of contact for the group with the local Māori community, and safeguard the group with the material they may be working with. In companies I've been

involved with, the kaumatua is one of the most important members, the person who has the knowledge and understanding of things Māori that many of the younger practitioners in the group don't have. They also act as a safeguard for many of the group's members in spiritual matters and maintain the group's well-being.

I have been fortunate to acquire a wealth of experience from the kaumatua who have worked with our group. They have taught, among other things, respect, patience and acceptance, and how to keep the balance of the group on an even keel. They have also understood the rhythms of the groups and when a break or food is needed. This has been a two-way thing, as they also needed to understand the dynamics of a theatrical company. Clearly, this experience is not only restricted to the realm of Māori.

For venue operators, the kaumatua is probably the person to contact second to the tour manager. They may ask questions to find out who the local Māori leaders are, or perhaps who should, or shouldn't, be invited to the performance.

Theatre in the European context is still relatively new to Māori. If your theatre has little contact with the Māori community, a touring Māori production may help to break down any barriers between the two communities and therefore help to build another audience for your venue.

## On tour

Touring is a difficult proposition at the best of times: getting audiences, balancing budgets, moving about the country, packing in and out of theatres, keeping harmony among your company and being away from home.

Touring a Māori production is different from touring a mainstream production although the two are beginning to move closer together. The fundamentals are the same: a group of theatre practitioners on tour. The difference lies in the cultural make-up of the group and the community responsibility that Māori practitioners are expected to shoulder. (This is in no way to belittle the social responsi-

bility other theatre practitioners carry in their work.) When touring a Māori production, you may find that the group is invited to a marae, hosted and formally welcomed, asked to speak at a local school to Māori students, or act as a role model for young Māori. For many Māori practitioners, this is a given when embarking on a tour. The play is the vehicle but much that surrounds it is of equal or greater importance.

One of the first things that's needed is to make contact with the local Māori community. You and your group are entering another iwi's rohe (area) and therefore need to acknowledge this. It is beneficial for you and your company to have a stronger local presence and make connection with the tangata whenua.

One of the key points when touring a Māori production is to note that Māori audiences don't tend to book. They just turn up. This happens in some towns and cities across the spectrum but is particularly obvious with Māori audiences. It can be harrowing for the producer but it's an issue that has to be accepted until more Māori work is toured and Māori audiences get used to booking. Just go with it. What this means is that the need to make contact with local people is even more important. Use all the people you know in that area to spread the word. My own family and relations have been known as the 'Māori Mafia' in rounding up people to attend both my own work and other Māori work I've been associated with. If it's good enough to tour, it's good enough to show to your family.

Touring is a stressful experience and if you can alleviate any of this stress then it can only enhance the well-being of the company and, ultimately, what is seen on stage. The sharing of food is one of the ways to do this. It may sound like a basic idea, but spending time eating and relaxing together is a means to relieve any tension and also air any grievances that may exist within the group. On a long tour, this could be a weekly occurrence and therefore part of the fabric of the group. A company with a full stomach will be willing to go the extra mile, if necessary.

Groups I've been associated with have always had mihimihi (introductions) at the beginning of rehearsals. It's an easy way to bring the group together. Often the technical crew is separated from the cast and this is one way to bring everyone together as one cohesive

unit. You may know something of the people who are working together in your group but it is also good to know where your fellow workers are at: what they've been up to, their previous experiences, if there have been any major changes in their life. It may help to build the unity of the group and give a greater understanding of that individual. It puts people on a level playing field so that all are considered equal – from the kaumatua through to the production manager, actors and backstage personnel.

In many Māori productions, there are waiata (songs). Individuals may have to sing the waiata in the show, but it helps to build unity if the entire cast also learns the waiata. It may also be useful at powhiri and help the company look 'tight' to the outside world.

It's also important to note that what you're bringing is a piece of theatre so the other community of importance is that of the venue. It is their 'house'; they look after it, tend to it and bring visitors (practitioners) to it. You need to ensure you have a good relationship with them and respect their 'house'. And remember, they know the area.

## Being the host

As I mentioned earlier, what I've written here is only one way a Māori company may operate. This is the way the groups I've been involved with have worked.

Initially, we make contact with the venue operator and ask if it is appropriate for us to takahi (bless) the space before we move into a full pack-in. Usually, we've found that a short karakia is said for those technicians who go ahead of the main group. When all of the company has arrived the blessing usually takes place. To 'takahi' or bless a space has the action of helping the incoming group feel at home in the space and making it their own. It also acts to rid the space of any presence that may have existed previously. On a tour of Aotearoa in 1998, we were in one theatre and Dame Pat Evison happened to be there when we were blessing the space. Part of the action of blessing a space is to physically touch parts of the theatre, thus making a physical connection. Dame Pat recognised this and said it was something she also did when she entered a theatre.

Some groups stick to a strict tikanga and have extensive karakia (prayers). Others allow the blessing to be less formal and allow the group to sing, dance and make themselves feel at home. The blessing usually takes only a short time as the kaumatua knows that the group is on tour and long ceremonies are not beneficial. Some local iwi will want to have a powhiri for the group and therefore they may take the responsibility to takahi the venue for the touring company.

A typical practice of groups I've been associated with is to invite the people who run the venue to be part of the takahi (blessing).

Respect is a two-way street and Māori protocol has a strong, ritualistic and theatrical basis. I believe there is an understanding and willingness for Māori tikanga to be accepted as a part of theatrical life.

This chapter was written by Hone Kouka, a New Zealand playwright and former Artistic Director of Taki Rua Productions.