

*Afterpieces:
A miscellany of well-considered trifles*

■ **Sharon Mazer**

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

The Speculative Act in Theatre and Performance Studies

Theatre and Performance Studies have travelled a long way since I fled the dim, dusty stacks of Butler Library at Columbia University where I was researching my dissertation on Middle English drama to sit ringside watching professional wrestlers training at Gleason’s Gym in Brooklyn almost thirty years ago. To write about fifteenth-century moral interludes like *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankynde* required a kind of speculative triangulation between the playtext, its socio-historical context and my own visceral understanding of how the theatre works in time and space. My supervisor, Howard Schless, a literary scholar who was renowned for his scholarship on Dante and Chaucer, and otherwise largely reliant on the magisterial work of E. K. Chambers,¹ asked me: “what can you bring to the study of these old plays that others do not?” I said, “As a theatre director, when I read a play I find theatrical cues, both to how the characters might act on the platform (the *platea*) and to how the audience might be expected to react on the ground (the *locus*.)” “Write that” was his response, and so I did.² But first there was the wrestling, to which I had turned (causing Howard some consternation), because it got me out of the library and into a space where I could see a contest between good and evil that was, in my overheated imagination, very much like that staged by medievals six centuries before.

As it happens, the challenges for scholars writing about performances by actors for audiences in the Middle Ages—the remains of which are scanty and fragmented—are much the same as those of writing of performances in the present; after all, our attention can never be comprehensive or fully objective. The role of the academic in re-presenting a performance for readers, re-constituting it as material for analysis and then performing that analysis is

complex and inevitably conflicted. That doesn't mean one shouldn't do it, but rather that the act calls for creative and thoughtful speculation, both in the sense of seeing (spectatorship) and in the sense of imagining beyond what can be seen (supposition). What is important, above all, is to present popular performance to readers in ways that provide a platform for thinking more deeply about what happens at the intersection between the theatrical and the social.

The act of speculation can be especially complicated in the not-quite-post colonial context. In Aotearoa New Zealand, where I have lived for over twenty years, and across the Pacific region, the field of theatre and performance scholarship has been greatly expanded by a number of recent books, including: *Places for Happiness: Community, Self, and Performance in the Philippines* (2016), by William Peterson; *Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Theatre from Oceania* (2014), by Diana Looser; and *Telling Stories: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Performance* (2012), by Maryrose Casey. These books are distinguished by their exemplary acts of speculation. Their vivid descriptions of performances on stages and in the streets have been effectively drawn in equal parts from the authors' meticulous archival research and from their personal, visceral ethnographic experiences as watchers and participants. In imaginatively triangulating between performances, spectators and themselves, they value the ephemeral even as it is materialised and analysed as text. Each book is remarkably successful in showing how theatre and performance, as popular entertainments, can be seen to construct, create and sustain local communities in the face of colonisation and its aftermath, of mediatisation and of globalisation.

This is the stage onto which Marianne Schultz steps with *Performing Indigenous Culture on Stage and Screen: A Harmony of Frenzy*.³ The book is rich in archival materials hitherto not widely available, and as such it should be a valuable addition to the growing literature on theatre and performance in the Pacific region. Schultz is not so much concerned with indigenous performance more globally, however, as she is focused on Māori performances for non-Māori audiences around the turn of the twentieth century, live on stages in New York and London, as well as preserved in films of the time. She prefaces her book with a question:

How did it come to pass that an American from upstate New York with German, Irish, and Polish ancestry become [sic] a historian of New Zealand and [the] performance of indigenous culture?⁴

Positioning herself as a “naturalized New Zealander [who has] become a true ‘kiwi’,”⁵ Schultz tells us that the book's chapters:

reflect my respect for expressions of indigenous cultures combined with my insatiable curiosity about why, what, where, and how people have engaged in theatrical performance. At the heart of this inquisition is the development of cultural expression and the role that the performing arts play in people's private and public lives, their social and cultural

interactions, their identities, and their understandings of the world that they live in.⁶

Her aspirations have been fuelled by her background as a dancer and by her PhD studies in the History Department at Auckland University, from which this book emerged. As such, she seems to be ideally placed for the task of mixing practical and theoretical knowledges, and well-equipped for the arduous task of working through the massive, fragmentary residue of popular performance.

Indeed, the book's evidence is plentiful. It proceeds largely via quotes from promotional releases and newspaper reviews, with Schultz's commentary and sporadic references to secondary sources, historical and theoretical touchstones, interspersed. The number of images is surprisingly limited for a book dedicated to performance history. The first image is a pair of maps designed to locate New Zealand in its remote corner of the globe and to show us the islands in close-up, with its major cities bilingually identified, which appears to anticipate a target readership that is more international than local. Of the ten images that follow, most are either word-based—playbills and posters—or accompanied by substantial citation of the accompanying text in their captions. This is emblematic of approach to the book as a whole, which repeatedly overlooks opportunities to extrapolate from words and images toward visualising about how these performances might have appeared to audiences at the time. Instead, the records of how performers, producers, promoters and audiences spoke of their experiences, are quoted sequentially, the citations are left to speak for themselves, and potential points of complication and contradiction are passed over without deeper critical analysis.

The problem here is not necessarily a refusal to imagine the performance for herself, but rather that she takes the words of others as read. For example, in writing about multiple representations of the *Hinemoa* story on stage and screen in the early twentieth century⁷ she describes the conditions surrounding their production, strings together various statements from contextual accounts and reviews, and then concludes:

Māori participation in this filmic representation of the *Hinemoa* [sic] story signalled a willingness to locate themselves within this environment for the education, entertainment, and pleasure of Pākehā. Apart from witnessing and interacting with Māori at tourist sites such as Whakarewarewa, most Pākehā in urban centers would not have had access to the places and actions seen in *Hinemoa*. With Bennett's guidance, but directed and framed by Pākehā, the actors ultimately created emotional responses to these legendary people and places. Their bodies' interaction with the landscape created a comprehension of Māori and New Zealand that was real and unreal, simultaneously historical and contemporary.⁸

In this, she seems remarkably sanguine in leaping from the limited evidence—accounts by the overseas film crew, snippets of outtakes (the film itself is lost), reviews and news articles—to make claims about the performers' attitudes

during the making of the film, the effective transparency of the film in offering a glimpse of native life, the affective emotional connection between Māori actors and Pākehā spectators, and the understandings that were thus produced.

The oppositionality of the final sentence here is an aside, not the starting point for deeper discussion, as she goes on immediately to conclude:

Visually, the films of the 1910s and 1920s, such as *Hinemoa*, presented versions of Māori and the New Zealand landscape that were at times both historical interpretation and realistic portrait.⁹

On what terms could this portrait have been seen as “realistic,” given the vagaries of its development as an entertainment created for and by Europeans from a Māori story? What might the history of its production reveal both about its social context, in particular the way “Māoriland” was manufactured for popular primarily non-Māori consumption then as now? Such questions sit under the surface of Schultz’s parade of performance documentation, for the most part unasked and unanswered, whereas elsewhere they drive theatre and performance scholarship, especially when indigenous artists were, and are, involved.

It didn’t have to be like this. The book concludes with an “Encore/Conclusion” in which Schultz briefly describes taking a visitor to a Māori Cultural performance in the Auckland War Memorial Museum:

Walking through the hall of Māori artifacts we entered the small auditorium [. . .]. As the five performers entered, audience member’s [sic] cameras began snapping. For 30 minutes the two bare-chested, *maro* (loincloth) wearing “warrior” men and the three women in *piupiu* and *pari* (woven bodice) spoke, sang, and danced for their guests. For this small group gathered together in this room, this in-the-moment visceral experience could be nothing more than 100 percent pure Māori and, therefore, New Zealand.¹⁰

She pauses to consider the context in which the performance appears:

Situated within the museum walls, alongside the preservation of Māori *taonga* (treasures) the message behind this performance was clear: In order to experience the real New Zealand, tourists had to view performances of *haka* and *poi*. Just being in the presence of these movements and sounds emanating from these indigenous bodies assured that one had truly “seen” and “experienced” New Zealand. What these performances confirm is that more than the static displays in the next room, the corporeal expression of New Zealand had become central to understanding and experiencing New Zealand.¹¹

Then she moves on to summarise the contents of the book along with repeating her realisation that “performance and the corporeal expression of culture construct meanings around people, communities, and nations.”¹² In the end, she

says, “we need to pay attention to performance; in particular to the Māori and Pākehā bodies featured here who created New Zealand on the stage and screen.”¹³ Had this experience been presented at the start, unpacked with an eye to its visceral production of ideas about the relationship between Māori performers and non-Māori audiences, theoretically framed and critically examined,¹⁴ it might have served as an excellent paradigm for responding to the provocations provided by her historical examples.

Avowals aside, the bodies, both Māori and Pākehā, have largely disappeared from the platform provided in *Performing Indigenous Cultures*. The issue is really one of disciplinary perspective. The book’s central argument, unqualified from its origins as a PhD thesis in a History department, is that performances can serve as “historical source material”¹⁵, a given in Theatre and Performance Studies. Schultz makes an extended case for performance history, which, she says, “demands that an historian imagines [sic] movement and sound in the empty spaces, between the lines, behind the frozen images of facial and bodily expression, and in the silences of surviving sources.”¹⁶ Further:

This “enacting/re-enacting” element of performance is what distinguishes it from other historical subjects; an event has been “staged” to represent something else. Moreover, a live performance event can never be repeated or received in the same way twice. Each performance constitutes new expressions, understandings, and interactions from both performers and audience members. The temporal nature of live performance combined with its unpredictability, volatility, and phenomenological experience are elements that set expression of culture via the theatre apart from museum exhibitions.¹⁷

As a historian, Schultz seems to be at a loss when faced with the challenge of analysing performance as performance. That is, she sees the phenomenology of performance as an impediment to analysis, rather than its object. She wants to look past its surfaces and contingencies, instead of employing the tools of a performance scholar to engage with those very surfaces and contingencies directly as signs for the social realities they represent.

That *Performing Indigenous Cultures* excels in collecting a massive quantity of the materials that represent New Zealand’s performance history is its great grace. As a dancer, Schultz had the possibility to show us how the performances she has excavated might have worked as performances in their socio-historical contexts. To present such smooth surfaces while lamenting the impossibility of knowing what performers and audiences felt at the time brushes past the challenge of explaining how performance might be seen to matter to the communities in which it appears, now as then. It elides the very real tensions in the relationship between performance scholar and performing subject, and in so doing it reinstates the power and status of the former at the expense of the latter. The best performance scholarship in this region is being done by academics who elicit contrary images from their materials and show us the process of attempting to puzzle out the contradictions inherent in postcolonial contexts. In making the act of speculation visible, they look into the gaps—the not-so-empty

spaces between the lines—and show us the messy bits, the ways humanity and sociality are interwoven into performance and culture. They allow themselves to be confronted by voices that are not their own, fix their and our attention on what cannot easily be explained away, and so in refusing to assimilate the stories of performances and performers into their own master narratives join with their subjects in resisting the re-iteration of colonisation on stage and off. We need more of this.

¹ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903). Standard texts in the 1980s also included: Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931) and O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

² See Sharon Mazer, *Scripting the Audience: Didactic Strategies in Middle English Drama* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1991), and Sharon Mazer, "The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling," *TDR* 34.4 (Winter 1990): 96-122.

³ Marianne Schultz, *Performing Indigenous Culture on Stage and Screen: A Harmony of Frenzy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁴ *Ibid.*, xi. To see two obvious mistakes in the first sentence of a book is unfortunate. The typographic and grammatical errors here are rife to a degree that is dismaying and exceptional, even for Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ In short, Hinemoa was a young maiden who, the story goes, swam across Lake Rotorua to be with her lover Tutanekai. These productions include: a series of tableaux and concerts staged by Māori impresario, Frederick Bennett beginning in 1908; the film *Hinemoa* shot by Georges Méliès in collaboration with Bennett in 1912; and another film, also titled *Hinemoa*, directed by George Tarr, also with Bennett's involvement, and released as New Zealand's first feature film in 1914. Bennett also collaborated with composer Percy Flynn on version for the Maori Opera Company in 1915 (127-134). Thanks to Māori film scholar Jani Wilson for assistance in clarifying the history.

⁸ Schultz, 133. Note that the legend of Hinemoa is not the same as the *Hinemoa* film.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's influential *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) is cited in the bibliography but not utilised here.

¹⁵ Schultz, *Performing Indigenous Culture*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.