

REVIEW

*Downman Post Theatre
10-5-07*

Courageous Maui spirited and epic

WHAT: Maui – One Man Against the Gods

WHERE: St James Theatre, 8pm, runs till Sunday

REVIEWED BY: Jennifer Shennan

THIS musical-theatre epic, revised from a preliminary version several years ago, has now been amplified, in every sense of the word, into a hugely generous, witty and spirited show that gives Wellingtonians many reasons to be proud of the director, Tanemahuta Gray, local boy made good, and the terrific team of performers.

There's powerful haka, rollicking rap, sweet poi, rich voices, as well as naughty tricks from hooligan brothers with consummately clever timing. There are huge scale figures delivered in heroic style: Ra the Sun, and Hine Nui Te Po the Night. There are stunning aerial figures on fly wires and silks.

There is a truly inspired lighting design from Martyn Roberts who lights about a million miles of silk banners in ways that take us under the sea and high in the sky, through a web of cat's cradle, into the fire and then snuffs the fire out. These are among the cleverest theatre-lighting effects you'll ever see.

There are powerful sounds and beautiful vocal settings in Gareth Farr's composition. Richard Nunns breathes life into koauau flutes and

evokes a huge history in the process. All the cast are singers, dancers, aerialists, actors by turn, or at least it seems that way, since the show is synthesized into a strong, single group.

There are mythological themes of Maui the explorer, seeking new land (well, we are living in the North Island, aka Te Ika a Maui, are we not?), of his quest for immortality, and of his reining in the sun to slow his passage across the sky in a sort of original daylight saving.

Merena Gray has choreographed Maori dance movement into a contemporary style with most endearing effect. But haka and chant are still there, and the terrific cast are staunch to those tasks.

Ra as the narrator (in English) throughout the evening, ensures that everyone in the audience can follow the themes.

There's enough spoken and sung Maori for you to feel encouraged to learn tenaa reo ataahua.

But perhaps Gray's and his team's greatest achievement is to have wedded these mighty elements of entertaining theatre down to a thread that reduces human emotions to a human and personal level: the tug and pull between parent and child, or the grief felt over the death of an infant.

This is a courageous show that would do well in Sydney, London, New York and Noumea. Go Poneke.