

# Polished Maui deserves worldwide exposure

Now, at last, we get to make something of our own myths

## John Smythe

- *Maui – One Man Against the Gods*
- By Andre Anderson, Tanemahuta Gray, Geoff Pinfield
- Directed by Tanemahuta Gray
- At Westpac St James, Wellington
- Until June 5

As an epic theatrical spectacle *Maui – One Man Against the Gods* is phenomenal. Riveting, amusing and awesome; it is also as profoundly insightful as any ancient rites-of-passage myth about an adventurous demi-god confronting the forces of darkness and light.

Yet its distinctively Maori pulse, look and feel, rooted in tradition but expressed with contemporary skills and technological flair, bring a new vitality to this very old tale.

Over the past decade or so, the prodigious talents of creative Kiwis have helped put *Hercules* and *Xena* on the small screen and *The Lord of the Rings* on the big one.

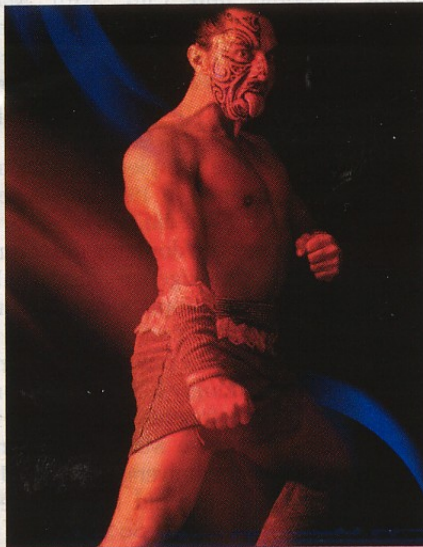
Now, at last, we get to make something of our own myths and legends.

In fact it was the 1990s Irish cultural renaissance that first inspired Tanemahuta Gray, a New Zealand School of Dance graduate and aerialist with the international touring company De La Guarda, to create a show that did for Aotearoa New Zealand what *Riverdance* and its clones were doing for Ireland on stages around the world.

A 40-minute work-in-progress was piloted in the 2003 Fringe Festival under the title *Te Ao Maarama*. "Even in its infancy," I wrote at the time, "it is a powerful work that cheekily merges primal themes and innovative performance devices with Roto-Vegas chic."

Its further evolution into the two hour and much more mature *Maui*, now devoid of its tiki-tacky elements, is imbued with a sense of cultural integrity and humour that makes the spectacle even more thrilling.

That it has come full-term, despite odds that reflect the obstacles faced by Maui himself, is a testament not only to Gray's vision and the commitment of his



**MAUI:** Tamati Te Nohotu as the legendary warrior confronted the gods

creative, performing, technical, production and management teams but, perhaps most especially, to executive producer Richard Boon and his team of investors.

It's not as if the recent history of large-scale live theatre premieres has been encouraging. While *Once Were Warriors*, the musical, proved many doubters wrong, *Whale Rider*, the musical, flopped badly. *The Hobbit*, Australian-produced with a largely Kiwi cast and scheduled to tour for a year, didn't get past Wellington.

*Maui*, however, has the x-factor. All of New Zealand should embrace it with native recognition and there is every chance the world at large will find it truly exotic and flock to it wherever the opportunity may arise. Being entirely in te reo Maori, it utilises kapa haka, karanga, waiata, patu, taiaha and poi to communicate its classical themes through the international language of physical theatre, rendering it no more limited by language barriers than, for example, *Cirque du Soleil*.

Prior study of the programme's storyline may enhance the pleasure but it's not essential. While the separation of earth and sky by the children of Papatuanuku and Ranginui may be specific to Polynesia, the notion of a god of light (Tama-Nui-Te-Ra) and god of darkness (Hine-Nui-Te-Po) is universal. Likewise the humour inherent in the initial inno-

cence of the demi-god Maui and the sibling rivalry of his testosterone-pumped brothers, and the harsh lessons his later arrogance brings, will resonate with traditional myth and folklore the world over.

Gareth Farr's resonant music, recorded with the traditional instrumental skills of Richard Nunns, evokes the elemental forces that provoke the drama.

Gillie Coxill's costume designs reject the flax skirt and woven bodice look for a contemporary Pacifica feel that sometimes jars by suggesting ancient Aztec, Egyptian, Greek and Roman influences.

Tolis Papazoglou's versatile set, edged with a stylised hint of fortified pa, features a vast sloped stage that transforms into steps, allows for pits of fire and accommodates land, sea and sky with an effortless flow. A hectare (I'm told) of fabric is ingeniously used to trap the children, enhance the aerial illusions of flight and flotation, and create oceans, above and below the surface, a giant jellyfish, fire, a huge entwined rope and Hine's massive black skirt.

Martyn Roberts' superb lighting completes the illusions of primal forces engaging with vulnerable and fallible humanity.

Largely aloft, Toni Huata's formidable Hine fills the space and Toa Waka's imperious Ra traverses the sky, chanting and orating in an ancient reo that commands respect. At ground level, Mere Boynton brings a soulful operatic passion to Taranga, unwilling to release her fifth and premature son to the realm of Hine Te Po. And so, from this inauspicious start, Maui's struggle for life begins.

Tamati Te Nohotu embraces the challenge of Maui's journey from innocence to arrogance, then back to a point of equilibrium with a splendid blend of humour, strength and human frailty. All eight ensemble performers deserve high praise but special mention must go to Taiaroa Royal for his exceptional dancing.

After this world premiere season, *Maui* will enter a further refinement stage before being mounted at Auckland's Aotea Centre in February 2006. Now that the technical spectacle has been mastered, further attention might well be paid to the universal truths at the core of the Maui legend, by way of bringing it to a more powerful and meaningful resolution.

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