



Technical production – Purapurawhetū

Playwright's set directions

Purapurawhetū begins with the following description of the stage scene:

It is early morning. The stage is lit in cool blues and greens. HOHEPA stares out to sea from the rock pools, looking confused. An empty sack hangs over his shoulder. We hear in a whisper, like the wind or tide, the voice of BUBBA.

Seven lines later, the following direction is added:

TYLER enters the whare raranga and starts to weave a large tukutuku panel.

Clearly two locations are required on stage:

- the beach – with its rock pools
- the whare raranga – where Tyler is weaving a large tukutuku panel.

These two spaces occupy different parts of the stage, and remain there throughout the action of the play.

The only other indication about the set given by Briar Grace-Smith is a note with the published script about the set for the first performance (by Taki Rua at Downstage in 1997). The appearance of the tukutuku panel is described as follows:

The panel was symbolised by a framework made from korari, the stalks of the flax flower. [Briar Grace-Smith *Purapurawhetū*. (Huria Publishers: Wellington, 1999) Page 21]

This statement affirms that abstractness and symbolism rather than realism are the way to approach the set design. This approach results in a largely open space that allows the action to flow across it, as well as allowing two separate but overlapping locations.

Light and sound

Light and sound are the principal means for defining the two locations, and for shifting mood and time. They also are the means for creating a further space

that is important to the unfolding of the action – that of a spiritual or ethereal realm.

The set design for Taki Rua's first production at Downstage Theatre was created by Diana Prince and Mark McEntyre. The reviews describe the set as "spare and spacious, its slender high structures and woven pieces floating over the stage and auditorium" (Budd, *The Dominion*, 23 May 1997), and as "an installation space where the play with textures, shadows and volume tells its own stories" (Amery, *Capital Times*, 28 May 1997).

Set designer Mark McEntyre explained that:

... the characters are woven into a story that is in one sense ephemeral, but in another is firmly located in the land. The design team structures this environment through the layering of sound, light, and sculptured object. [from the programme for Taki Rua Production's 2000 touring production of *Purapurawhetū*]

Lighting designer Helen Todd described her concept as follows:

Serving the transitions of time, personality and space, directional light will define the performance place. Light will interact with the sculptured spaces of the design and with dynamic profiles of the suspended installation. The intention is to layer light and shadow suggesting a shifting reality, a place of indeterminate depth. [from the programme for Taki Rua Production's 2000 touring production of *Purapurawhetū*]

The phrase 'directional light' suggests that the light did not all come from overhead, as is most common within theatre. For instance, it sometimes came from within the woven structure, throwing woven pattern across all the planes of the stage.

Activity 1: Design a set and lighting plan

Design your own set and lighting plan for *Purapurawhetū*.

Keep in mind the following requirements:

- the need for two locations – the beach with its rock pools and the whare raranga with the tukutuku panel;
- the need for an open space that allows the action to flow between the two locations;
- the principle of symbolic rather than realistic design;
- use of design elements that are consistent with the theme of weaving, and with the Māori context.

Activity 2: Create a soundscape

Record a soundscape for a segment of the *Purapurawhetū* script. You may use human voices, natural sounds, and/or instrumental music.

Bear in mind the following principles and ideas:

- a soundscape should enhance but not dominate the play;
- a soundscape must be consistent with the themes and intentions of the play as a whole;
- a soundscape can help suggest the place and time;
- a soundscape is an effective method of suggesting an ethereal presence;
- a soundscape can create mood.

Activity 3: Representing props

Read the following scene:

AGGIE gets up and looks out of the window. HOHEPA follows her.

HOHEPA: You'll take your place alongside Puanga, the beautiful rata flower. (*He points out a star.*) See her? She marks the rising of the first new moon.

AGGIE (*slapping HOHEPA's hands*): Don't go getting carried away with yourself. I think our baby's hungry.

She breaks herself away and picks up the veil, which now represents the baby (AWATEA). HOHEPA leans over baby.

Purupurawhetū Act 3 Scene2

The stage directions state that Aggie looks out of a window. Because this is a flashback scene, the window is not physically represented in the stage set. We know it is there because Aggie looks out of it, and because the design has been consistent in its abstractness.

When she picks up the baby, the veil she cast aside from her role as Kui becomes the baby. Again the representation is symbolic. (Is there also perhaps a symbolic link between the veil that covers the old lady's blindness and the lost baby?)

A few lines further along, Hohepa takes a taonga from his neck. This time the prop is probably indicated by a physical taonga.

[Note: 'props' = properties: objects used on stage as part of the performance.]

1. Why would the taonga need to be realistically represented while the window is not? What is the difference between these two different kinds of props?

2. Go through a section of the script and decide which props should be realistically represented, and for which ones it would be better if they were suggested symbolically. Keep in mind the following considerations:

- design consistency;
- the ease with which things can be realistically represented;
- what happens to an item before and after it is needed in the action;
- whether a real or symbolic prop will create the stronger theatrical impact.

Activity 4: Marking time and place

- 1.** Go through a section of the *Purapurawhetū* script and mark all the transitions in time and the designations of place. (You could use **Extract 1** for this activity.)

- 2.** Decide which transitions need to be made explicit to an audience.

- 3.** Decide how you will communicate those suggestions of time and place. You may use:
 - actor's movement or gesture;
 - sound;
 - lighting change;
 - realistic props;
 - symbolic use of material already on the stage.

Be careful to be strong but not heavy-handed in your communication.

Activity 5: Weaving exits and entrances

Briar Grace-Smith described the director Cathy Downes' style for the Taki Rua production of *Purapurawhetū* as follows:

Cathy very much directed it like weaving. She had actors ... coming in like this, and coming out. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Janinka Greenwood, 2002]

1. Take a section of the script and examine the exits and entrances.
2. Map out the movements on a plan of the set as if they were part of a weaving.
3. Look at what you have created, and consider the following questions:
 - What angles have you created?
 - Do they correspond to flax weaving or plaiting, or European-type weaving using a warp and weft?
 - Do these movements fit the action of the play?
 - Do they enhance the meaning of the play?