

British Theatre Guide

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Strange Resting Places

Created by Rob Mokarana and Paolo Rotondo
Taki Rua (Aotearoa/New Zealand)
Soho Theatre
(2008)

This delightful entertainment has a lightness that makes it seem improvised but it has in fact been carefully constructed from personal family histories, research among survivors (including a former German soldier who had fought New Zealanders in Crete) and other factual material concerning the 28th Māori Battalion during the Second World War. Three actors playing cross-race, cross-colour, cross gender and cross-species, possibly at times cross-eyed but not I think even once cross-legged take us on a journey from the landings at Salerno to the battle for Monte Cassino in Italy in 1943-44.

Two Māoris, one like a huge young All Black rugby forward (Maaka Pophatu) the other a rather thinner (Rob Mokaranka) are sitting on ammunition boxes set on a tarpaulin cloth and playing guitars while an altogether slighter long-haired fellow with an Italian accent is plying the audience with sandwiches and filled pastries. There aren't enough for everyone to have one. "You'll have to share. It's wartime, rationing," he tells them.

It is all very relaxed and when the musicians break off and the Italian (Paolo Rotondo) starts to set the scene the house lights stay up. This is a show in which the audience are made complicit and one of the cast may try to make a date with you when he's not deep in the action. By the very simplest means these actors transform themselves at one moment into a pig, a goat, from a dead German into a chicken; an actor switches from an Italian farmer's wife to her pretty daughter, the farmer to his little son - a cap standing in for the boy when being his father, or at one point a succession of holy statues including a talking Madonna with a crying baby Jesus.

Props are minimal: guitars are guns, a poi (one of those pom-poms Māori maidens use in traditional dances) is whirled around to be a plane's propeller. Drinks and food are mimed - with a double gag on the miming and Monte Cassino is bombarded with a few handfuls of chalk dust making clouds of destruction.

Director Leo Gene Peters' production is beautifully basic theatre that breaks into song when triggered by emotion: Māori song, Italian song, it doesn't matter if you don't understand the words - and that goes for much of the dialogue too, for there is enough English, sometimes by way of translation, to ensure you know what is going on.

The Italian, who turns out to be a deserter from the Fascist army trying to get back to his family, and the big Māori are both be farmers. The Italian boasts about his sheep and horse and his little boy; the New Zealander has many times his flock. "How do you manage to milk so many?" he's asked. 'We don't milk them. Cows are for milk. We take the wool off, then we eat them!'

This is a feel good piece but it also reminds us that war is about death, destruction and personal tragedy and it does so in an entirely entertaining way.

First produced in New Zealand five years ago and already seen in some other countries, this British premier is part of Origins, a festival organised by Border Crossings that celebrates First Nations' creative arts and brings together artists from the indigenous cultures of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. Three other plays can be seen this month at Riverside Studios and there also film screenings and participatory events. For more details, see www.originsfestival.com

At Soho Theatre until 9th May 2009

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)