

PARADISE

Looking For Exits

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I have glimpsed Paradise in the North, West, South, East. So where is it? Lemi Ponifasio, the choreographer of PARADISE, a theatre piece with generic aspects of surrealism and Polynesian realism, familiarizes us with the notion that reality is not what we anticipate.

The Kunstmuseum in Basel, Switzerland, is home to two Gauguin paintings: one of a market, with Tahitian women carrying fruits to the market; and *Nafea Faa Ipoipo*, young girls available for marriage. In the background of both works is a scene Western viewers associate with Paradise: lush forests, green, healthy fruits, colour, and the sense that the land is still virgin emerges. Next door is Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*.

In the Stuttgart Staatsgalerie, another Gauguin painting, *E haere eo I hia*, is separated by a hallway from Holbein's gloomy *Stations of the Cross*. Holbein's Western Paradise has Jesus as its doorway. Gauguin's setting is in the Pacific.

The West is inundated with brochure information and advice on how to get there. The idea of that doorway to Paradise has been sold to Pacific Islanders: the weekly Sunday donations to the church are a lifelong lay-by for entry tickets for the family. Getting there is not so easy. But the painting *Tahiti Revisited*, by William Hodges, which he brought back from his journey with Captain Cook to Tahiti, shows a tropical lagoon where salubrious smiling girls cavort carefree through luxuriant foliage—images that have provoked wonder, lust and longing since first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London 1776.

At the Theaterhaus Stuttgart, MAU perform PARADISE, a sequence of narratives that voices the boundaries of orientation. Its imagery relates to how the nations in Moananui a Kiwa are treated by individuals, communities, Hollywood, and militarily and economically advanced countries. America and France use Pacific soil and air to store, commercialize, parody, bully, and test nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The meaning of Paradise has been packaged by Westerners as a deal that includes eternal sun, endless golden sandy beaches and ocean. Unfortunately, this package also included the nations and people of Polynesia.

Characteristic of Lemi Ponifasio's visual universe is the manifestation and presence of an imagined, cognitive world. In PARADISE, that world is damaged. Paradise is treated as a unique species, a sickly animal conjured up from the past and reinterpreted for theatre. There are only two

colours, black and white. At the same time, it encompasses the mystery of this world of ideas. Ponifasio resuscitates and uses metaphors to reveal, through audio, film, oratory and dance, the impact of colonialism, the invasion of diseases, the debasement of images of Pacific peoples—but also the triumphant memories of past histories.

All images: MAU performance
PARADISE by Lemi Ponifasio at
the Venice Biennale 2003



Motifs of transition, birth of humankind along with monstrous creatures, migration, protest, reconciliation, thresholds and borderlines emerge. These include the use of Maori and Samoan orators and Tongan dance, drawing the eye from an organized interior to the outside world and vice versa: lizards, light, mountains, birth, horror, dance, water, and the forever present use of darkness. Light is an intriguing device and is used vehemently by MAU lighting designer Helen Todd to instigate growth (in this case, creating an exterior reminiscent of Polynesian Pulothu and architecture).

For me, it is the structure of one word that lines much of Lemi Ponifasio's ideas: Va. Inside this word, transparent materials are created out of the desire to articulate the truths, the joys and the fears of living in Moananui a Kiwa; Va is home to Polynesian ancestors, our heroes, dark kings and queens, our poets, singers and writers of prose.

Albert Wendt in his epic poem describes poetically this Va: *Inside us the dead,/ Woven into my flesh/ Like the music of bone flutes.*

Restless spirits, original footage of Bikini Atoll, and forebodings are the haunting qualities of PARADISE: images disconnected from the world of dreams, in settings that usually embody memories of Polynesian mythologies and the advancement of televised horrific pictures of war, famine, and the invasions of countries by America and its allies.

The performance attracted considerable attention, and generated an immense reaction from the audiences in Stuttgart and Amsterdam. We were taken on a rich and powerful journey through various plateaus of Maori procedures of the Powhiri. This foundation and obligation having been established, the performance began. Powerful. Enigmatic.

MAU is composed of musicians, orators and artists from different Pacific nations. This plays an important part in how we perceive and experience reality, in itself a huge uncompromising force of strengthening ties and obligations to each other. Some of the most defining imagery for me was the performers' voices, which gave shape to the mountains that we all must climb so as to see, understand and feel the distance we must travel ... in order to achieve jurisdiction over our own stories and destinies.