

Theatre in Paradise

By Sharon Lawless
Producer Community &
Education
The Nuffield Theatre
Southampton

Sharon.lawless@nuffieldtheatre.co.uk

October 2009



In June 2009 The Nuffield Theatre was invited to perform *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge) at the Wan Smolbag Theatre's **International Theatre Festival** in Vanuatu in the Pacific Ocean and New Zealand. The tour was supported by the British Council NZ. *Rime* had just completed a U.K tour of secondary schools.

The remit was also to work with two young emerging theatre practitioners from New Zealand who shadowed us throughout the festival. We also ran workshops and worked with young people from 15 – 21 years of age in Auckland

Wan Smolbag Theatre is an amazing organisation. Set up 20 years ago by English Director Peter Walker and his wife Jo Dorras. They not only work professionally with Ni Vanuatu actors but write new social dramas in Bislama - the local language. They are continuously developing work with the youth in Port Vila (the capital of Vanuatu) - they have established skills based Youth Centre on site for young people unable to afford to pay to attend school, a Nutrition Centre and a Health Centre all on the site of their theatre. They work with teachers throughout the Pacific Island providing high quality play related resources and tour regularly to the most rural and remote of islands taking everything needed for community theatre in a "small bag" with them! All the plays aim to raise awareness of issues such as sexual health, domestic abuse governance and environmental issues and have a positive and long lasting massive impact on the communities they tour to.

Five of us set out on the adventure to the other side of the world: Russ Tunney (Associate Dir) who adapted and directed *Rime*, Michael Magnet and Michael Cole (actors), Suzie Erith (Stage Manager) and myself – Producer, The tour was organized over an 8 month period following on from my trip to Auckland in the summer of 2008 when I met with the British Council and various theatre companies there.



Getting the set to Vanuatu and trying to find a freight company who would do it was interesting!

Eventually Soundmoves solved all our logistical challenges and were amazing, highly efficient and within the budget. We weren't their usual kind of freight – they mainly transport big bands such as Pink and Radiohead around the world. This said one version of our set was made by WSB ready and perfect for when we arrived as the planes from Auckland to Port Vila could not transport our original set which stayed in NZ for that leg of the tour.

As part of the festival we all performed in total to a broad community audience of nearly 8,000 people.

Te Rakau Theatre performing 'The Battalion' from New Zealand

- Polytoxic Dance Company performing 'Teuila Postcards' from Australia
- Kurruru Theatre performing traditional and contemporary dance from Australia
- Sista Native singer and body percussionist from Australia
- Diat Alferink performing 'Wakaid Girl Lyndhurst Kid' from Australia
- Steve Noonan performing 'Fidget and Dangerous' from Australia
- Les Kidams Cie Theatre performing 'le Fond du Panier', from New Caledonia
- Wan Smolbag Theatre performing '40 Dei', 'On the Reef' & 'Shame and Ignorance'

A few unusual things happened during the festival. We were scheduled to perform in the Chief's Nakamal but the Chief died the night before and his body was laid in state on the new stage that had been erected for the festival. The next night as the aboriginal dance company Kurruru performed and we were doing the get out back stage the concrete floor beneath our feet was turned to jelly by an earthquake!

The rich diversity of performances, skill and cultural exchange was a unique experience for both Wan Smolbag Theatre actors, the Ni-Vanuatu, and the visiting companies. I was particularly touched by the generosity of spirit of all of the WSB company members to help with the set, get-in's and generally make us feel incredibly welcome and part of their company. Quite a life changing experience!

See U Tube film 2 Workshop in Paradise”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeQJiLRRwDc>
Produced by TVNZ show Asia DownUnder.