

ALEXANDRA LODGE

University of Waikato, Victoria University of Wellington

Ngā Kupu o Te Rangi : Deaf Gain in The Dramaturgy of Aotearoa's Trilingual Theatre

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the theory and practice involved in playwriting for the three national languages of Aotearoa New Zealand: Te Reo Māori, New Zealand sign language (NZSL) and NZ English. The concept of Deafness as a culture rather than a disability is central to this creative practice. I will discuss the creative process methods used to explore Deaf humour and storytelling in my own creative practice from a hearing perspective with the goal of developing inclusive, intersectional dramaturgical practices. I will discuss my influences from several forms of storytelling in pop culture, particularly Deaf stand-up comedy and poetry. Using examples from my current creative practice doctorate, this research explores the dramaturgical implications of writing for stage in visual languages, as well as the challenges involved in the creative process.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism
theatre
Aotearoa/New Zealand
Sign language
Vernacular

INTRODUCTION

My doctoral research is about the theory and practice of trilingual theatre, specifically playwriting for the three national languages of Aotearoa New Zealand. However, I will be focussing on just one of those languages and the creative gains it may bring: New Zealand sign language. One of the key values of my research is to approach Deafness as a culture and my hearing privilege within Deaf culture as a linguistic barrier.

The origin of this research has been my identification of a gap as a theatre practitioner. Many of the most exciting contemporary theatre practitioners in Aotearoa are writing bilingually and refining what is referred to as “syncretic theatre” – blending cultural and theatrical codes into new theatre forms.¹ However, I have observed that while other

practitioners have explored questions of place, history and identity in two languages, little work has been done on the dramaturgy of trilingual performance in Aotearoa.

A European, hearing experience is still hegemonic in dramaturgical terms in Aotearoa. Although Te Reo Māori and New Zealand sign language (NZSL) have equal ‘national language’ status to English they are often mediated through spoken English in playwriting and generally operate in separate, exclusive spheres from each other in the performing arts. However, they are languages that are specific to New Zealand and their linguistic histories are intertwined with the development of an Aotearoa-specific culture. The reliance on English in performing arts is symptomatic of a colonial and ableist mentality. This research aims to explore the implications of different dramaturgical approaches to Aotearoa trilingualism as a means to develop an inclusive dramaturgical *kaupapa* (paradigm).

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

One of the central theoretical influences in my research is the social model of disability. The social model of disability is a theoretical framework defined by Mike Oliver.² This model was a driving force for the disability rights movement throughout the UK in the 1990s which nurtured and inspired many prominent artists with disabilities such as Neil Shabin, Jean St Clair and Paula Garfield. The model posits that a lack of accessibility is what actually disables many people with physical impairments. When communities actively seek to make their institutions and services easily accessible to people with a variety of needs, then the social ableism is addressed.

The international rise of forms such as sign poetry signify a shift in mentality toward the *kaupapa* of Deaf gain. In terms of a bilingual theatre, this means that sign language and speech may work together in a variety of complex dramaturgies, rather than speech acting as a crutch for sign language. Both languages and their associated cultures (Deaf and hearing) being presented as equal but different is a prime example of syncretic theatre. There have been two significant instigators of Sign Theatre in Aotearoa in the past decade: Odd Socks Productions and the Giant Leap Foundation. Both of these companies have worked in inclusive media and strived to bring NZSL and Deaf performers into mainstream theatre. Recently University of Waikato lecturer Dr Laura Haughey has been working with the Deaf community through her company, Equal Voices.

I have been fortunate enough to participate in this work as a hearing performer. These three companies create a vital sense of visibility for NZSL and the Deaf community in Aotearoa theatre. I have learned first-hand from the audiences of bilingual work *At the End of My Hands* that public visibility of a marginalized language is empowering to communities.³ Several times in the post-show forums Deaf audiences expressed a sense of community pride and inspiration in seeing NZSL performed on mainstream stages. My research follows the concept of disability and D/deaf performance practice which, as Kanta Kochar-Lindgren observes, aims to “create a synthesis between activism and aesthetics, particularly in order to use performance as a site of resistance to normative cultural representational and perceptual paradigms regarding the extraordinary body”.⁴

New Zealand sign language has enormous performative potential as it is a language that inherently lives in time and space. It is also interesting as a linguistic hybrid of *Pākehā* (European) and Māori cultures. NZSL originated in British Sign Language and is still very similar – but the differences are largely in signifiers that are specific to Māori culture. By bringing these three languages together in my scripts, I explore the implications of partnership and participation through language and the form of syncretic theatre.

Another theoretical influence in my research has been the creative and critical writing of playwright Kaite O’Reilly. O’Reilly is a UK-based playwright at the forefront of inclusive dramaturgy. She uses language as a key indicator of inclusivity in her work. Her play *peeling* was written for three physically disabled actors, and stretches the tensions between language and performed disability through her use of British Sign Language (BSL), Sign-Assisted English, audio descriptions and a spectrum of registers in English.⁵ Her play *Woman of Flowers* is a modern retelling of a Welsh folk tale with a Deaf protagonist and several monologues in BSL.⁶ O’Reilly’s willingness to confront difference and awkwardness in order to celebrate diversity is what makes her particularly relevant to my creative research.

O’Reilly’s practice builds on the social model of disability. Key aspects of her practice that I have incorporated into my research are her use of captioning, her choice to write specifically for Visual Vernacular (as well as BSL) and her regular collaboration with visual language director, Jean St Clair. O’Reilly has described her dramaturgical approach as “exploring what happens if everyone gets the same information, just not at the same time”.⁷ This dramaturgy of complementary information is present in her use of captioning. She prefers to caption her work rather than have live BSL interpretation on-stage. This is a Deaf-

led practice and means that Deaf audiences have a slight advantage when the performance shifts into visual languages as they are able to follow the English words from the captions but also see the difference and interpretation in performance.

O'Reilly's versatility within visual language is an example of heteroglossia – a term originating with Bakhtin which referred to a monologic communication model, but which has recently been re-appropriated by Marvin Carlson. Carlson uses the term to refer to the intersection of multiple languages “in terms of reception, mimesis and the social, political and cultural investments of theatrical presentation”.⁸ This is the definition of heteroglossia that I have employed in my research. I have found this term particularly useful when differentiating between distinct visual languages, both in my own creative practice and in critical writing about multilingualism.

O'Reilly's recent work often clarifies the distinction between the three visual languages she scripts for:

1. British sign language
2. Sign-Supported English
3. Visual Vernacular.⁹

Note that the term “Visual Vernacular” is similar but distinct from the umbrella term “visual languages”. Deaf performer and visual language expert, Jean St Clair describes the distinction between BSL and Visual Vernacular (VV) thus:

Theatricalized BSL is based on BSL but [takes] on the visuality and [expands] on it. Visual Vernacular is independent of English and BSL, apart from using iconic BSL signs. As VV is not ‘language-based’, the process is much more free. [...] One way to use a comparison to VV is to watch cartoons, the setup is similar. Wide, medium and close-up shots of particular objects or a bird. For the close-up, I would describe or act like a bird with facial expression; with the medium close-up, I would use my arms to move like wings and for the wide shot, I would use my hand to show the bird flying away into nothingness.¹⁰

It is clear from St. Clair's description that Visual Vernacular itself contains several languages and physical dialects: mime, dance and a filmic framing through the body. All of these aspects of Visual Vernacular, as well as BSL and Sign-Supported English are contained within the phrase “visual languages”.

CREATIVE PRACTICES

As well as indicating in her author's note that parts of the script are to be performed in visual languages, O'Reilly strengthens this practice through her collaboration with the aforementioned St Clair as a visual language director. Interviewed, O'Reilly recalled developing a sequence for *Woman of Flowers* with St Clair and performer Sophie Stone:

The three of us would get together and I went, 'Here is the text. I don't want a translation of it.' And they're going, 'Thank you, because it would be impossible. It wouldn't make sense. It would just not be language that leads itself to visual representation.' ... [And in] the case of *Woman of Flowers*, we decided that we would let the original English captions remain. So what we had was a bilingualism – no, not bilingualism, more like parallel texts.¹¹

Carlson describes captions as “an alternative communicative channel operating outside of the illusory world of the stage” and discusses captioning as a heteroglossic device to expand the meaning of a theatrical performance.¹² He goes to specify that for the device to “keep an audience conscious of its extradimensionality”, the style of captioning needs to “be subjected to a kind of defamiliarization, encouraging spectators to recognize it as something other than an accepted convention, and a transparent conveyer of meanings identical to those expressed in another language by the actors.”¹³ This defamiliarization, the liminal space between captioned language and visual language, has particular strength in Deaf dramaturgy. The collaboration between playwright and visual language director (as opposed to visual language director and play director) is a unique part of O'Reilly's creative practice. The relationship suggests that scripted Visual Vernacular requires a co-authorship outside of the written text. Although O'Reilly's script specifies when the protagonist Rose should shift between literal BSL and heightened visual language, the full extent of Rose's heteroglossia was developed off the page. This indicates a Deaf-culture-led practice, and highlights the paradoxical nature of the hearing practice of writing text for a language that cannot be truly transcribed.

Although the dramaturgy of the written work is decidedly bilingual, the nature of the work when performed includes a much wider linguistic spectrum. Speaking about her collaboration with Jean St Clair and the liminal spaces that they create in, O'Reilly has written that “Benjamin Lee Whorf's claim half a century ago that a different language is a different reality was never more acute and apt.”¹⁴ This is a use of heteroglossia as a theatrical postmodern effect – juxtaposing two linguistic versions of the same concept next to each other in performance in order to create a prismic, multidimensional effect.

In my own research I have experimented with several different approaches to trilingual script development. One of the most considerable challenges in my research has been developing a script with a combination of Deaf and hearing performers. A large part of this is due to my own linguistic incompetence with NZSL, meaning that I require the support of an NZSL interpreter for anything more than simple discussions. One of the first creative decisions I made was to write the main Deaf character for a specific actor, Shaun Fahey. Shaun is a well-known Deaf comedian and storyteller and I wanted to write for his strengths. So his character in the script is also a comedian and I drew on Shaun's existing comedy routines to guide the structure and tone of his character's dialogue. During the developmental workshops for the script, I often deferred to Shaun as an unofficial visual language advisor. Where possible I have used visual and physical workshopping techniques, reiterating that my written words were just a starting point. These workshopping techniques included asking the performers to present their monologues without formal language (or with Visual Vernacular only) as way to workshop the content.

In this workshopping technique, Shaun would often suggest ways for the hearing actors to perfect their visual storytelling. During the development for the written work, I would give him the final say on how dialogue in NZSL should be phrased. Or if he commented that something didn't look right in NZSL we would workshop a line together to figure out a phrasing in NZSL that he felt was more appropriate which I would then transcribe into English as best I could. One aspect of the script that remained largely unchanged throughout the developmental process was the first meeting between the hearing protagonist Briar and the Deaf character Vic. In this sequence they do not understand each other's language but make each other laugh at mimed penises and breasts.¹⁵ I knew that I wanted this to be a starting point for several reasons based on my on experience of working on Equal Voices' bilingual Deaf history piece *At the End of My Hands* – where physical humour was a key dramaturgical device to subverting expectations of a Deaf character for a hearing audience.

Hearing audiences can get flustered and nervous that they will offend or not be able to understand Deaf people and some hearing people have a preconceived notion of Deaf people as fragile, serious victims of a tragic disability. I thought undermining the morbidity of the hospice setting of the script and any preciousness around cultural awkwardness was important for establishing a clean slate on which to build this central relationship. Although

the subject of the play is serious and it contains the practice of several sophisticated theories, it is no use to anyone as a creative artefact if it is not accessible and engaging. Comedy is used regularly throughout the text to ground the story through laughter, keeping the characters connected and three-dimensional to the audience.

I knew that I wanted to draw on performer Shaun Fahey's own experience as a comedian and I used some of his set comedy routines as a guide for scripting within Deaf joke structure. Deaf jokes traditionally employ Visual Vernacular (like most forms of Signed storytelling) and revolve around a visual punchline (rather than a linguistic punchline). I transcribed one of Shaun's set comedic pieces as a blueprint for how I then went about scripting Vic's extended dialogue. As in the script, physical action/Visual Vernacular is italicized and the NZSL is in plain text. This joke contains two characters and uses a character-switching device (rather than hearing-style narration), hence the presentation as dialogue:

Driver: *Leave party, say bye to girlfriend.*
Walk around my car, very nice. Get in car, get comfortable, adjust rear-view mirror. Look at self in mirror, primp eyebrows, looking good, pull out a stray nose hair – OW!
Okay ready to drive. Start up car, drive over bumpy curb onto the road. Change gears, going faster. Yeah! Overtake slow driver. Going faster, speedometer climbing up and up. Change gears, faster.
In rear-view mirror: flashing lights. Shit! Slow down. Pull over onto bumpy road-side and stop car. Ashamed, roll down window.
Police: *Thumbs in belt, check out car as approach driver. Writing ticket.*
Mouth moving quickly, speaking to Driver.
Driver: Sorry, I don't understand. I'm Deaf.
Police: Oh, you're Deaf? My brother is Deaf. I can sign!
Driver: *Shocked.*
Police: Can I have your licence please?
Driver: *sulkily gives his licence.*
Police: *writes ticket and gives it to Driver. Remember, drive slowly.*
Driver: *takes ticket snarkily.* Thank you.
Police: Bye! *Walks away happily.*
Driver: *watches police leave in side-mirror. Crumples up ticket and throws it on the floor of car. Starts car, drives over bumpy curb onto road. Sadly drives offstage.*¹⁶

In performance, this routine takes about five minutes. One way that it differs from a hearing comedy routine, is that the punchline actually happens in the middle – when the police officer reveals that he can Sign (“Driver: *Shocked.*”). In a hearing joke structure, this

revelation would be placed right before the end of the routine. However, because the joke is the effect on the Driver's demeanor – a drawn-out visual gag – the punchline happens in the middle and continues on for another minute or so. I used this joke structure as a starting point for the characters' riffing on dick jokes when they first meet. The sequence builds with a sense of *wero* (challenge) between the two. They are testing each other's boundaries, trying to make the other laugh and seeing what they can communicate without language.

The 'trickster' role that Vic plays in the scripted sequence is the embodiment of Deaf comedy – and his undercutting and charming of the hearing protagonist are a microcosm of the larger NZSL dramaturgy at play. The conversational structure flows between NZSL, Visual Vernacular and English. The two characters negotiate each other within their separate languages but return to physical comedy and Visual Vernacular as a comedic common ground. In rehearsal we read the sequence through with an interpreter a few times so that Shaun could see the shape of the joke in NZSL, which he would then make his own. When he found a Visual Vernacular form that he was happy with, we would film a short video of it for him to use as reference, which eventually created a patchwork script of NZSL video-clips.

A further linguistic layer of this sequence is the presence of an onstage NZSL interpreter. The first two scenes are scripted with the interpreter quite invisible as the work is establishing an expectation that the play will only be Briar and Vic, with an interpreter present for practical purposes. The convention throughout the performance is for the interpreter to only interpret Briar's speech into NZSL as Vic's NZSL is already being captioned. It is deliberately overstimulating in order to draw attention to the untranslatable, uninterpreted parts of their conversation. When the conversation shifts into Visual Vernacular the Deaf and hearing audiences are both able to follow the jokes while seeing it visually become untethered from the translation of an interpreter or captions.

CONCLUSION

Implementing intersectionality into creative practice as my research does can be slow, detailed work. But drawing from the richness of Deaf culture from influences such as Deaf comedy and learning from these traditions is also a joyful and progressive process.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alex Lodge is a playwright and doctoral candidate. Her plays are produced across Aotearoa and Australia, including a 2013 season of *Our Parents' Children* and a 2016 season of *Sing to Me*. As a co-founder of full.stop.theatre she has co-written several acclaimed works including *Tea for Toot*, as well as the new *Modern Girls in Bed*. Both *Sing to Me* and *Modern Girls in Bed* were shortlisted for the prestigious Adam Play Award in 2017. She was one of the first recipients of Eleanor Catton's Horoeke Reading Grant. She completed a Masters of Scriptwriting at Wellington's International Institute of Modern Letters in 2011. She is currently doing her creative practice Ph.D. on trilingual playwriting in Aotearoa through the University of Waikato and Victoria University of Wellington.

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