

# **AESTHETICS AND DIDACTIC INTENTION: THE MEETING PLACE OF BEAUTY AND INFORMATION TRANSMISSION IN THE 2006 COMMUNITY THEATRE PRODUCTION OF *SWAMP TREASURES***

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper is the outcome of qualitative research undertaken around a community theatre production presented at the Hamilton Fuel Festival 2006. Swamp Treasures was an attempt to articulate in a theatre aesthetic the plight of the wetland regions in the Waikato province. There were 80 participants, a choir, an orchestra, an elaborate set, lighting design and over 30 specifically made theatre masks. I invited a group of eight teenagers to watch the performance and they were then interviewed, answering specific questions. The data were then considered using Kant's theories of beauty, aesthetics and communication as a reference point for the production's development, delivery and effectiveness. As Swamp Treasures was designed as a montage of impressions and points of view, the research has been able to evaluate the artistic efficacy of the differing styles and the aptitude of these techniques to transfer information.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Community theatre, Aesthetics, Beauty, Kant, Communication

## **INTRODUCTION**

One spring morning in September 2005, I stood in the garden of our home in the Waikato countryside and marvelled at the relief and wonder that is spring. The trauma and struggles of humanity are pointed out to us at every turn and the culture of complaint rises in clamour; how easy it is to feel overwhelmed by such complaint. Yet this particular morning all of that receded, giving way to a sense of appreciation of my life and the value of this verdant basin: the Waikato. Buoyed by the cherry blossoms and billowing clouds, I decided I wanted to dance this feeling, to put into theatrical action this connection I felt so deeply. I contacted the director of the Fuel Festival (a biennial festival of New Zealand performance held in Hamilton), and a couple of weeks later he sat with my wife and me, and we committed ourselves to creating a community theatre performance. We decided our venue should be The Meteor Theatre and that it should be about Waikato, by Waikato people and pertinent to our time and place. I wanted a theme for our performance that anyone could relate to, and out of that feeling of appreciation that I felt for the land of Waikato there emerged a theme of conservation, specifically of

the Waikato Wetlands. We decided to eschew activist rhetoric and to confide subtly with our audience that the conservation of our natural environment is deeply connected with the retention of a quality of life that is threatened by the willingness to disregard nature and natural formations of land and water. We wanted to say to our audience that conservation is not about tree hugging or eco-terrorism: it is about ordinary people claiming what they know to be of value and retaining it. We all understand the stress and threat our natural resources are under, and it is time to claim healthy lands and waterways as vital. We also wanted to support this visceral connection with a philosophical belief that if you take a stance and make yourself heard, the land will value you and you, yourself, will become a 'swamp treasure'.

For many weeks I pondered on how to structure such an enterprise. I have a full working life and a young family: how could I co-ordinate and manage a big community show as well? Then a plan began to emerge. As director, I would firstly engage the interest of existing community performing arts groups in the province, articulate the theme and then delegate aspects of the performance to these groups. My most intensive contact would be with each group director or manager. My liaison would be with those individuals who would then be responsible for the ten minutes of performance time allocated to them. I began to contact likely candidates and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

By December 2005 we had five groups, along with their prospective directors, committed to the project. The groups were The Waikato Youth Orchestra, The Waikato Youth Choir, The Acting Ensemble (undergraduates from the University), the Te Aroha Performance company (a group of 20 teenagers from Te Aroha), and Kinetic Theatre (a youth theatre company recently established in the city). This diverse range of disciplines dictated, to a large extent, the structure of the performance. It would be of a montage format with each group contributing to aspects of the theme: not a usual narrative but a collection of impressions and points of view.

### **PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS**

Having engaged the interest of community groups, I now turned my attention to a range of questions. What form did we wish to embrace as our mechanism of sharing? Should we present our thoughts and feelings in a direct and informative manner, thereby attempting to win empathy for our cause with suitable information? Or was there another approach, an approach that was perhaps more subtle, more affecting and poetic? It was the last option that interested me and I began to formulate a tactic that would allow me to investigate the mechanisms of aesthetics, and how the notion of beauty could play a role in influencing an audience's point of view and in imparting knowledge and information. In order to undertake this process I needed a philosophical basis from which to proceed. For me, beauty engenders an experience of pleasure, bringing meaning or satisfaction, which can, in turn, promote a positive reflection on the meaning of my own existence. Immanuel Kant (1928), in *The Critique of Judgement*, argued for beauty as a recognisable quality:

One will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object and the judgement logical. When one calls a thing beautiful he [sic] demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. (p. 52)

Beauty may engender a salient experience of a positive reflection of the meaning of one's own existence. An object of beauty or an experience that engenders a response of 'wow that was beautiful' is one that resonates with personal meaning. I wanted to interrogate the experience of the audience in terms of the kind of information they received by having such an experience at a theatre performance, the form of which was deliberately fashioned for aesthetic qualities. I wanted to pursue Kant's (1928) notion of beauty as "a property of things" and understand in what fashion that "property" could be communicated. Guyer (1979), in his book *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, further articulated Kant's point of view: "A beautiful object pleases us because it is an occasion for communication, and because we have a natural disposition to communication, the satisfaction of which brings us pleasure" (p. 26). It was this "occasion for communication" that I wished to create out of my practical efforts as a theatre artist, all the while encouraged by the Kantian view of artistic endeavour:

The artist, having practised and corrected his [sic] taste by a variety of examples from nature or art, controls his work and, after many, and often laborious, attempts to satisfy taste, finds the form which commends itself to him. Hence this form is not, as it were, a matter of inspiration, or of a free swing of the mental powers, but rather of a slow and even painful process of improvement, directed to making the form adequate to his thought without prejudice to the freedom in the play of those powers. (Kant, 1928, p. 174)

Form is a matter of building with patience and perseverance. The foundations are fashioned from communication and the strength of a shared objective, a common philosophical understanding of what is valuable and worthy of effort. With these philosophical foundations in place, I then, as an artist, have the privilege of placing upon that structure the crown of my personal aesthetic.

Having put this proposition – presenting the performance – and collected data (my methodology is detailed in following section, Creative Process/Methodology) into an associative sequence, I then hoped this proposition would lead me to a conclusion. Kant (1928), in his hypothesis concerning communication, aesthetics and the possibility of knowledge, articulated a premise that such communication and knowledge-sharing can take place. Guyer (1979) made a summary:

The share ability of a knowledge claim is a necessary condition of it being knowledge and that what must be communicable in any case of knowledge is both a propositional content and a propositional attitude of belief directed towards this content. (p. 284)

This "share ability" of knowledge established my opening position: the holding of belief or knowledge establishes a condition of communicability, and the

assumption that this can be communicated. Guyer (1979) went on to deduce that “every instance of knowledge has its subjective base in a disposition, or a relationship between imagination and understanding and there is a particular ‘proportion’ between these two faculties” (p. 285). As a theatre artist, I took up the challenge to exercise this “proportion” between the faculties of imagination and understanding, and enable the “proportion” to become a satisfying and cognitive encounter for the audience.

Kant’s (1928) progression of his theory then leads us to the interaction or “quickenings” of the proportion and the possible response: “There must be proportion between imagination and understanding in which this inner relationship for the quickening (of one faculty by the other) is most conducive. This disposition cannot be determined except by feeling” (p. 286). This was to be the focus of my research: to assess the degree of “quickenings (of one faculty by the other)” and the degree of “feeling” aroused (Kant, 1928). I was then able to focus the production design and performance aesthetic, as an interrogation of the premise that the notion of “beauty” in a stage production can be a cognitive mechanism, stimulating point of view and arousing feeling responses.

### **CREATIVE PROCESS/METHODOLOGY**

The first 40 minutes of the performance were to be guided by my aesthetic intention regarding design, both visual and aural. The final 20 minutes would be performed in a more didactic direct manner, delivering factual information and opinion. The politics, philosophy and aesthetical intentions were all clearly in place, so I then set about the task of creating the performance. I decided we should present a voice from the swamp itself: the voice of the creatures. This intention was not to do with aesthetics but with the wish to occupy a specific point of view. I began by asking a range of questions. What is it like for the Pukeko birds to cross the road? What happens to a bird family whose nests are overturned by dogs and they become refugees in their own land? What of the fabled creatures that once inhabited this environment, the Patupaiarehe? Should we simply discount them into mythical non-existence or, if we gave them a stage, consider what they would perhaps say? I wanted to present what I imagined to be their experience. The opening prologue, sung by The Waikato Youth Choir, included these lines:

Black backed duck and brother frog  
Sister fish and dragonfly  
You have not been forgotten  
We have come to tell your story.

By taking the creatures’ point of view, I determined we could represent them in a stylised fashion and then set them into motion in a constructed environment. This meant our setting needed to be coherent in a design manner, with the masks and costumes representing the creatures. I commissioned a 30 metre by 3 metre painting that hung as a backdrop to the entire performance along the back wall and down the sides of the theatre towards the audience. Then, on stage, we assembled a swamp. A large willow tree sat slightly to stage right and balancing this on stage

left were mounds of moss, rushes and swamp plant material growing over fallen timber.

This stage set was then lit with the intention to evoke a dreamlike atmosphere, conjuring up an ambience, an impression and mood. This approach is in keeping with an aesthetic design that, by suggestion and inference rather than didactic statement, transported the audience to the world of the swamp. Each of the independent community art groups then came to the theatre with their own 10-15 minutes of performance intact. In the months leading up to the performance I had kept close contact with the progress being made by each group and would request adjustments and offer encouragement.

I continued to strive toward creating sequences and moments of ‘beauty’, spatial arrangements of aural and visual components that would bring to the mind of the audience the feeling that they were witnessing Kant’s (1928) aphorism of “beauty as if it were a property of things” (p. 52). If I was to garner any insight as to whether or not my intentions of transmitting information via an aesthetic were successful, I needed specific data.

In order to gather data about audience responses, I had determined that I would do post-performance interviews with a group of teenagers who had attended a performance. Interviewing teenagers appealed to me for two reasons. Their knowledge of wetlands and conservation issues beyond the sound bites they may have encountered would probably be minimal, and, secondly, their experience of an atmospheric, interpretive, poetic and visual kind of performance also would probably have been limited. By recording the responses of an unsophisticated theatre audience, I hoped to get fresh responses, rather than ones from viewers who are accustomed to such theatrical styles and are, therefore, under the influence of previous experiences that can bring a certain prejudice or point of comparison to the task of performance interpretation.

I contacted a drama teacher from a local high school and asked if it would be a useful exercise for a group of her students. She agreed to conduct the interviews one week after the students had seen the performance. I provided her with a list of questions and also suggested she could ask other questions that would clarify and develop their answers. The nature of the interviews was to be informal with the central purpose being to draw out from the students their responses to the premise I was testing, that ‘beauty’ can transfer information and arouse feeling. The interviews were recorded on videotape and sent to me. I had these tapes transcribed, worked with their answers on paper and also viewed the videotape. There were eight students interviewed: six from Year 12 (four males and two females) and two from Year 9 (one male and one female). The group were asked to respond to specific questions concerning my intention. The first four questions were to do with factual information: what was learned from the experience. The fifth question was about their emotional response, and with this question I began to see in their answers “a quickening of one faculty by the other” (imagination aroused by understanding) and then the disposition or temperament that is determined as a result of that quickening (Kant, 1928, p. 286).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

My intention of arousing in the audience a sense of being in the presence of Kant's (1928) "beauty as if it were the property of things" (p. 52) managed to establish itself in this context as a sense of awe. This was partly due to the artistry of the spectacle and partly due to the newness of this form of theatre for the respondents. One response was:

The first part caught your attention emotionally and got you into the feel of what was happening around and in the swamplands, and this kind of carried over into the speaking part.

Another said:

I don't think I would have learned as much from the second part if I hadn't seen the first because the first part made me really care and be interested enough to listen.

These responses suggested that beauty may prepare the observer in some way to being more receptive to information about what has been perceived. Perhaps this is the relationship between Kant's (1928) "beauty as a property of things" (p. 52) and the potential for beauty to enhance the individual's receptivity to receiving information. One precedes the other. One answer indicates the observer felt moved to question the entire idea of what beauty can be:

To me it was sort of expansive, building our horizons and it opened your eyes. The wetlands are not pretty and they are not marketed to you and you don't see them for their own natural beauty and I think that's what the first visual piece did and that's how it affected me. I realized there was more to beauty than what the current media and theatre are showing us.

However, not all agreed that it was informative in any way:

I found the second part much clearer, the dance, the abstract stuff, was pleasant on the eye but I didn't find it relevant. The opening part was mystical and then there was the message. I would have found it more involving to integrate it all into a storyline.

Other answers referred directly to specific masks and creatures (see Photos 1, 2 & 3), expressing surprise and delight in their strangeness.

Certain of the images were really amazing. For example, the tall long-necked creatures walking out of the mist.



**Photo 1.** *Pukeko and Heron*. Masks by Richard Homan



**Photo 2.** *Patupaiarehe*. Masks by Kalani Tarawa



**Photo 3.** *Mantis*. Mask by Richard Homan

In relation to Kant's (1928) concept of "quickenings of one faculty by the other" (p. 286), there seemed to be a clear division between those who were willing to process their response to beauty or aesthetics and allow that response to prompt a feeling, and those who were not. One respondent was clearly affected: 'I felt very moved by it, moved and quite sad'. Another commented: 'The first part caught your attention emotionally'. However, the remaining students, although expressing a sense of mystery and wonder – 'the opening part was mystical' – were not emotionally affected. These young people were impressed by the aesthetic qualities but seemed to remain unmoved by the plight of the creatures depicted. One commented that a storyline was needed, another that the masks seemed to impersonalise the creatures and that they therefore became something she watched but to which she remained emotionally uncommitted. It is as if the sense of awe experienced by some of the young people was not necessarily an appropriate stimulation for an emotional response.

Guyer (1979) provided an explanation of Kant's (1928) *The Critique of Judgement* by considering the success of communication and the ensuing pleasure. This was consistent with Kant's notion of the "share ability" (Guyer, 1979, p. 284) of knowledge. My embracing of these principles found a resonance with at least one of the respondents. This young person appreciated the experience of the live theatre situation as being 'real':

With the second part I felt like I'd seen everything they did before, we've had those messages drilled into us since we were little, take care of the environment and stuff, and I felt I understood the plight of the wetlands much more from the first piece. I saw the creatures and I thought this is real as opposed to a bunch of people telling us about this place, its plight and what I should do about it. It's the difference between reading about Africa and going to Africa.

For this student there was value in witnessing the depiction of the swamp, as he felt the information as delivered in the second part he had heard before, whereas the alternative communication mode aided understanding of the plight of the wetlands more than simply being told of their plight. This, in many ways, is the crux of what I attempted to do: to stimulate the experience of appreciation and understanding through the use of aesthetics. This respondent was not the only one to get this information from the earlier part of the production:

To me the biggest thing was discovering how much life there was in the wetlands. Rather than just talking about these animals they had really good physical actors playing them, made me realise these are more than animals but are life forms that have been there since forever. I realised how much you don't see but it's actually there.

In Kant's (1928) parlance, this is "the quickening of one faculty by the other" (p. 286). The information the student got was that the plight of the swamp was connected to him and the creatures shared with him a life-force, a conclusion born out by his comment: 'These are more than animals but are life-forms that have been there since forever'. This observation indicated that the transport of information by aesthetics can lead to empathy with and understanding of the subject matter.

Beauty is a form that exists in the natural world but for the artist, who wishes to communicate, the finding of that form is a continual journey. The moments of beauty are treasures that sustain us and provide a vindication of our efforts to express, communicate and weld together the sensibilities and beliefs of people.

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