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“I am the play”
The Drama of Authenticity
in John Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau*

Michelle Johansson
2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English – Creative Practice
This thesis is dedicated to my parents –

‘Ilaisaane Eniketi Matalave Dickin

&

Desmond Norman Dickin
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like the saying “it takes a village to raise a child”, this thesis has been raised by many hands. To all of the wonderful scholars, poets, performers, playwrights, friends, family and friends-who-are-family who have made this work possible – thank you. Very special thanks and acknowledgement to the following:

To the Polynesian theatre-makers upon whose shoulders I, and this thesis, stand.
To my supervisors - Associate Professor Murray Edmond for his wisdom, expertise, guidance and generosity of creative spirit. And to Dr Selina Tusitala Marsh for her support throughout this thesis and her ongoing and relentless advocacy for Pasifika peoples and literature in Aotearoa.

To ‘Ilaisaane Matalave Dickin, who always believes I can be better than I am;
To ‘Iunisi Bayley – constant friend and budding Pasifika scholar – whose doctoral thesis I look forward to reading (challenge extended!).
To Jeff and Desmond Junior, who supported me endlessly, fed me and each other, and kept the home fires burning throughout the madness. Also to ‘Iunisi, Lokani, Lokani Junior and Viola Johansson; and to Uluilakepa Leha.

To the Black Friars Family – who have shared this journey in Polynesian Theatre since the beginning. Especially to Lauie Tofa, Billy Revell, Misipele Tofilau, Siosaia Folau, Ashleigh Niuia, Simulata Pope, Fa’ananafu Tofilau and Viola Johansson, who time and
time again have my back. Once and Always - Thank you. Thank you. A million times, thank you.

To the cast, creatives and crew of *Mele Kanikau*, 2013; To Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Jackie Pualani Johnson, John Enright, Otto Heim and Bob Evans; To Kumu Blaine Kamalani Kia and Kumu Aruna Po Ching; To Kelly Malone; To Geraldine Peters; To Joanna Forsberg; To David O'Donnell; To Peter O'Connor; To fellow PhD-ers Dr Robert Sullivan, Robin Peters and James Wenley; To Natalie Faitala, Whetuu Nathan and Reverend Emily Worman. To Grant Thompson for generously allowing me the time and space to make the final amendments. To the team at Teach First NZ: Ako Mātātupu, especially Jono and Lynne, for being there at the very end.

To the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship fund, the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women, the Tuakana Conference Fund and the University of Auckland Māori and Pasifika Leadership fund for financial support.

To all of my friends and family who have, throughout this journey, supported me, sustained me, laughed and cried with me -

    Mahalo a nui loa.
    Malo ‘aupito.
    Thank you.
It is not sentiment alone that leads many romanticists to think of the Pacific in theatrical images; the Polynesian setting is actually dramatic, the psychological implications of its poly-racial society make for rich speculation...the peoples of the Pacific find their most spontaneous expression in music, the dance, and in poetic utterances – all components of the drama...

We want to have a far greater representation from the various race-groups that make up island societies and we hope for the day when they can appear in plays created solely for them and by them...

We have the rich heritage of many cultures, the fullest appreciation of myth, legend and history, and a fresh new field of artistic and social material which has not been standardized and crippled by precedent.

We can have a truly fine theatre.

We will.

John Kneubuhl
Abstract

This research engages with the work of afakasi American-American Samoan playwright John Kneubuhl. As a polycultural, pan-Pacific dramatist, Kneubuhl’s work explores post-colonial discourses, power structures and social and cultural hierarchies. An afakasi playwright also concerned with authenticity, Kneubuhl wrote from both inside and outside these contesting dialectics of power and his unique dramatic voice fuses the best of Modernist Western drama with the ancient Samoan performance tradition of Fale Aitu. By navigating the complicated spaces between his worlds, however uneasily, Kneubuhl advocated for theatre that spoke to and for Polynesian people. Through the production of Mele Kanikau: A Pageant, and a Tongan based methodology of kie\(^1\) weaving, this thesis engages with and explores Kneubuhl’s work as an agent of change.

In his published trilogy of plays, Kneubuhl presents cultures in crisis, at risk of not only the on-going and enormous impact of colonization, but new dangers in the forms of global commodification, the burgeoning demands of tourism, and the more critical, and much more subtle threat from within – Polynesian people themselves. This thesis and my production also engage with the occasion and impulse for the composition of Mele Kanikau. By exploring the dramatic manifestation of Kneubuhl’s afakasi heritage in Mele Kanikau and the play’s existential concerns with personal and cultural loss this research problematizes the drama of authenticity played out in the play.

\(^1\) “fine mat” – (Tongan: Tu'inukuafe, 1992, p.174).
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Production Images by Joanna Forsberg.
Problematizing Playwright, Play and Players

2 “Long house, as for canoes or hula instruction” (Hawaiian: Pukui, 1986, p.52)
John Kneubuhl was a playwright steeped in paradox: Afakasi\(^3\) American and American Samoan by birth, Kneubuhl’s craft was fuelled by his totolua\(^4\), but belonged to neither; he felt deep sympathy and loyalty for the indigenous people of Hawai‘i, but scathingly criticized their traditional ruling class; he was a successful and prolific Hollywood writer, but loathed the art of screenwriting; he was fundamentally concerned with issues of representation and authenticity, but chose to address these through one of the most inherently artificial mediums of all – the theatre. In his trilogy, *Think of a Garden and other plays*, Kneubuhl presents cultures in crisis, at risk from not only the on-going and substantial impact of colonization, but threats and challenges to Polynesian ways of being through global commodification, the burgeoning demands of tourism, and the more critical, and much more subtle threat from within – Polynesian people themselves.

Similarly, this thesis is concerned, just as Kneubuhl was, with the perennial questions of drama and the double paradox of representing loss in the theatre – how can absence be represented theatrically? How can an inherently inauthentic act convey authentic meaning and/or messages of authenticity? What of the inherently unstable concept of ‘authenticity’ so often debunked in postcolonial discourse? How can the un-representable be represented?

This doctoral research makes its original contribution to knowledge in the field of English and Drama Studies by examining the work of John Kneubuhl through its creative corpus and written thesis. The primary lens for this investigation of Kneubuhl’s cultural,

\(^3\)“half-caste” (Samoan: Allardice, 2000, p. 8).

\(^4\)“two-bloods” or “of mixed descent” (Samoan: Allardice, 2000, p. 90). Kneubuhl used the term to describe his dual ancestry as opposed to “afakasi,” which often has negative connotations that will be explored further on in this introduction.
theatrical, and philosophical interrogations of authenticity and representation is my production of *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant*, staged at the Fale Pasifika at the University of Auckland, May 2\(^{nd}\) to 5\(^{th}\), 2013. Despite Kneubuhl’s position as the “spiritual father of Pacific Island theatre” (Balme & Castersen, 2001), his work is largely critically unexamined. This thesis provides a comprehensive history of Kneubuhl’s theatre-making, and contextualises his work in wider Oceania and in Aotearoa New Zealand. Through this thesis and my production, the following questions shape my interrogation:

- How does the dramatic manifestation of Kneubuhl’s *afakasi* heritage in *Mele Kanikau* form both subject of and vehicle for his existential meditations on personal and cultural loss?
- How does the meta-drama of John Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau* function to reveal, develop, and problematize the drama of authenticity played out in the play?
- In what ways can a pan-Polynesian, Pasifika production of Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau*, with its amalgamation of ancient and modern Hawaiian hula operating as a metonym for Hawaiian culture, contribute to an understanding of representation as central concern and subject matter of the drama?

This thesis and my production also investigate the occasion and impulse for the composition of *Mele Kanikau*; the reasons for the fifteen year gap between its composition and that of the other plays in the trilogy; and the consequences for the text that it was not staged seriously until 38 years after it was written. Through the production of *Mele Kanikau*, I come kanohi ki te kanohi, or ‘face to face’ with the challenges of how to make this play work on a stage in Aotearoa, New Zealand and extrapolate upon the challenges I faced in directing it.
JOHN KNEUBUHL AND HIS WORK

I am a polycultural,5 Pasifika theatre-maker – and in the context of this research, specifically an *afakasi* Tongan director - examining the ways in which Kneubuhl’s work engages with post-colonial discourses, power structures and social and cultural hierarchies. Kneubuhl set a dramatic precedent for dramatists like myself as an *afakasi* concerned with issues surrounding cultural authenticity. I am particularly interested in how Kneubuhl’s contestation of the dialectics of power from his insider/outsider status allows his unique dramatic voice to fuse Modernist Western drama with the ancient Samoan performance tradition of *Fale Aitu*.6

In an interview with PBS during his Hollywood years, Kneubuhl was asked “Where do you derive all your confidence?” to which he playfully replied, “well, confidence comes easily when you’re the greatest Swiss/Welsh/Samoan playwright the world has ever known” (Kneubuhl, in Johnson, 1991). Intended as a joke, Kneubuhl describes his amusement that the interviewer then “looked at [him] as though [he] was the most egotistical idiot who had ever lived” and was unable to regain her composure for the rest of the interview. Kneubuhl’s quick wit and sense of humour permeate all of his plays, and his ability to create humourous moments in his scripts that translate across languages and cultures, is an integral part of his theatre-making.

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5 The term “polycultural” is used by Dr Karlo Mila-Schaaf to refer to cultural capital where the term “polycultural capital...is coined to describe a theoretical construct which describes the potential advantage Pacific second generation (New Zealand born) may experience from on-going exposure to culturally distinctive social spaces” (Mila-Schaaf, 2010). “Polycultural” might also be used to describe Kneubuhl’s ability to live and work within the “culturally distinctive social spaces” of several Polynesian cultures.

6 “house of spirits” – A comedic theatre form (Samoan), defined simply as “comedy” in Allardice, 2000 (p.20). This is more fully examined in the Literature Review and further applied in Chapter Three.
The son of a Samoan mother and an American father, Kneubuhl's multicultural heritage produced a distinctive artistic fusion of elements from Polynesian and Western theatre. Born and raised in Samoa, Kneubuhl began his education in the schools of the Catholic Brothers in American Samoa. He attended two Brothers schools – one in Leone and one in Atu’u in the town of Fagalogo and he claimed that the “brothers were remarkable, dedicated teachers” (Kneubuhl, in Enright, 1989). Kneubuhl’s respect for the Catholic brothers and other missionaries in the Pacific is borne out in his statement that he was tired of “anti-missionary clichés” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) and in his sympathetic portrayal of the character Brother Patrick in *Think of a Garden*. Kneubuhl was sent to Punahou School in Honolulu when he was 13 as his brothers had been before him. In Honolulu, he lived with the Judd family with whom his own family had close ties. Following the Judd family traditions, he went on to study at Yale University, under Thornton Wilder at Yale Drama School. Here he wrote two plays, *The Sunset Crowd* (1942) and *Saint Mac* (1941), both set in American Samoa and both produced at Yale. Returning to Hawai’i in 1946, he won acclaim as a playwright for *The Harp in the Willows* (1946) and *The City is Haunted* (1947) with the Honolulu Community Theatre. Kneubuhl moved to Hollywood for a successful twenty-year career as a writer for television. However, those Hollywood years were fraught with a sense of loneliness and dislocation and they ended when Kneubuhl had a suicidal psychotic episode that resulted in years of psychoanalysis. After “twenty years of wasted time and energy” (Kneubuhl, in Enright, 1989), he returned to American Samoa in 1968, to lecture on Polynesian history and

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*7 Biographical references in the Introduction come from oral history interviews with Kneubuhl conducted by John Enright in 1989.*
culture, and to fight for the implementation of indigenous bilingual education for young Samoans.

Kneubuhl met Dorothy Schenk – affectionately called ‘Dotsy’ - in the eighth grade at Punahou School where she directed him in the class play (Johnson, 1997, p.252). John and Dotsy were close friends until romance eventually struck when Kneubuhl stole Dotsy from her betrothed while Kneubuhl was attending Yale. As Johnson describes, “their union was to become a lifetime partnership” (p.252).

Kneubuhl was a lifetime sufferer from tuberculosis, and in his later years, he also developed prostate cancer. He died in 1992 on the opening night of his last play, *Think of a Garden*, which he had finished writing in hospital in Pagopago. The collection of his later plays, *Think of a Garden and other plays*, was published by the University of Hawai‘i Press in 1997. This was his only published work.

Jackie Pualani Johnson describes the trilogy in the Afterword of the book as “the culmination of a lifetime of thought, put to paper by a writer whose bicultural heritage haunted him and drove his art” (Johnson, 1997, p.256). Kneubuhl wrote in a personal correspondence “I tell anybody interested that the three plays are really about the making of plays...They are really about The Writer and his search” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1997, p.257). This trilogy explores “themes of cultural identity, loss and redemption for Polynesians of mixed blood and second thoughts” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1999, p.116). Although the plays are set in different times and spaces, each addresses key issues of representation, loss, culture and cultural integrity, politics, history, the Pacific diaspora and the artifice of play-making. The first of the three plays, *Think of a Garden*, is the most widely regarded of Kneubuhl’s published works. The story revolves around the assassination of the Mau independence movement leader, Tupua Tamasese Lealofi, by
the New Zealand police. It is told from the point of view of a young boy, whose adult self is the narrator-figure of the “Writer,” looking back from the verge of Samoan independence. This evocative and essential moment in Samoan history is made intimate to the audience as the play positions us within the domestic household of Tamasese supporters. *Think of a Garden* resonates with a sense of loss – historical, political, and cultural – a recurring theme in each of the three plays of the trilogy. *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* is the second play and will be summarized in detail further on in this chapter. The final play – *A Play: A Play* – is a further step into meta-theatricality as characters move between layers of reality and representation. Kneubuhl acknowledges the influence of Pirandello’s seminal work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), on *A Play: A Play*, which includes character/actors who question the nature of their creation. Layers of story speak to and through each other as the characters are doubled – “James Alama” is also “James Actor” – and actors play two fictional characters at once. In this play, Hawaiian playwright James Alama prepares to sell his ancestral home and leave Hawai‘i. On the eve of his departure, he and his household are visited by a modern and unflattering reincarnation of the goddess Pele, who promptly creates sexually charged anarchy for each of the characters in turn. In this play, Kneubuhl draws attention to the artifice of the theatre and raises existential questions about the nature of creation itself. Are we, as the character James asks, in the hands of “He who wrote us. Who is writing us. Even now. At this moment” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.247).

The significance of the *Think of a Garden* trilogy and John Kneubuhl in the history of Polynesian theatre-making in Aotearoa and in Oceania is examined more fully in Chapter One. However, it is important to foreground the trilogy here at the outset of the thesis. The eponymous play *Think of a Garden* was among the first Pasifika plays
produced in Aotearoa, and for many Samoans living here, *Think of a Garden* was the first time they had heard a truthful and significant Pasifika story told on stage. Samoan novelist, Albert Wendt, comments:

> Without a doubt John Kneubuhl was one of the great pioneers of Samoan and Pacific drama. Before Kneubuhl there were no Samoan playwrights in the Western sense of theatre. His life, education, and development as a writer was a fusion of Samoan and *Papalagi*[^1]. He was the first to fuse these traditions and create what we can call the first Samoan/Pacific modern theatre. So he was truly a pioneer (Wendt, personal communication, 3 July, 2010. [Italics and footnote added]).

Sinavaiana-Gabbard argues that in Kneubuhl’s work, “one finds the literary craft lending perspective and illuminating a social landscape worried by volatile questions of culture and power, race and history, oppression and agency amongst Polynesians” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000, p. 209). In Chapter Two, I use categories from Sinavaiana-Gabbard to frame a discussion around Kneubuhl’s work in the theatre, and finally discuss Kneubuhl’s own existential explorations, as he navigates the complex nuances of culture, history and language through theatrical representation.

**THE PROBLEM OF DISCOURSE**

Although this is a thesis in English, the study of John Kneubuhl and *Mele Kanikau* demands critical foregrounding, utilizing terms from the discourses of Polynesian identity politics and post-colonial concepts such as transnationalism, hybridity, syncretism, authenticity, and representation. In this research, I also draw on Polynesian (particularly

[^1]: “white man, European” – (Samoan: Allardice, 2000, p. 54). Throughout this thesis *palagi, papalagi* *palangi* and pakeha are used.
Samoan, Hawaiian and Tongan) languages and cultural concepts, which include *talanoa*, *teu le vā/tauhi vā*, *fua kavenga*, the Tongan *kie*, and the deep significance of hula.

Post-colonialism is described by Wendt in his landmark article ‘Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body’ in the following terms:

What is the post-colonial body? It is a body “becoming,” defining itself, clearing a space for itself among and alongside other bodies, in this case alongside other literatures. By giving it a Samoan *tatau*⁹, what am I doing, saying? I’m saying it is a body coming out of the Pacific, not a body being imposed on the Pacific. It is a blend, a new development, which I consider to be Pacific in heart, spirit, and muscle; a blend in which influences from outside (even the English language) have been indigenized, absorbed in the image of the local and national, and in turn have altered the national and local. (Wendt, 1999, p. 410-11. Italics and footnote added)

For the purposes of this research Wendt’s definition will be used alongside the definition of “post-colonial” in *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2nd ed, 2000). Here, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin acknowledge that while before the 1970s, “post-colonial had a clearly chronological meaning designating the post-independence period” (p.168), in literary circles “post-colonial” is now used to discuss “the effects of colonization on cultures and societies” and:

the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their

⁹ “tattoo” – (Samoan: Allardice, 2000, p. 78)
contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nationals and communities. (Ashcroft et. al., 2000, p.169)

Therefore, a critical study of Kneubuhl’s work is intrinsically invested in this discourse, as the subject matter of his plays springs from these effects: from *Think of a Garden*, poised on the edge of Samoa’s independence from colonial rule, to *Mele Kanikau*, in 1970s Hawai‘i, where indigenous Hawaiians were (and arguably still are) suffering from “the discursive operations of empire.”

Identity politics is defined by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as “a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups” whose members “assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination” (Heyes, 2012). For Kneubuhl, the injustices suffered by indigenous Polynesians were a driving factor in his campaign for bilingual education in American Samoa and Tonga, through which he challenged the “dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.” However, Kneubuhl’s growing understanding of his own developing identity politics only became clear through great personal, psychological trauma. Despite Kneubuhl’s considerable success as a Hollywood script-writer, he eventually suffered from a psychotic, suicidal episode that caused him to reject the ‘Hollywood dream’ in order to reclaim his indigenous artistic roots:

> for thirty years of my life, I lived as a half-person, my haole\(^{10}\) half, twenty of them in Hollywood where I assumed a counterfeit voice, denying my own. So split, so

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\(^{10}\) “white person, American, Englishman, Caucasian; formerly any foreigner, foreign or introduced of foreign origin”- (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 58)
denying my total self, so denying the reality that was me, I could no longer maintain the charade...and I began for the first time to piece my real self together (Kneubuhl, n.d., “playwriting lecture notes” [Italics and footnote added]).

Upon his return to American Samoa Kneubuhl challenged the institutional oppression of American Samoa’s education system and fought for bilingual education to be established. He urged Polynesian writers to seize their right to self-determination by writing about the Polynesia that they, and he, knew and loved. Kneubuhl’s close friend and fellow writer, John Enright, claims “when we play with JK and his works we’re in the big leagues, playing hard ball, for cultural keeps” (Enright, personal correspondence, April 1994). Kneubuhl was engaged in the discourse of identity politics, determined to pursue social justice for bilingual Samoan children and to raise the awareness of Polynesian writers of what was and is “magnificently there and...useful in their search for identity” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1997, p. 266) – their own tremendously rich culture and vast heritage.

Hybridity, a key concept for identity politics, is “one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory” (Ashcroft, Griffith, & and Tiffin, 2000, p. 108). Like the word “afakasi”, it carries connotations of something that is incomplete, indicating that somewhere there exists a perfect whole, against which this “hybrid” is measured and found wanting. However, hybridity has been reclaimed, also defined as “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, Griffith, & and Tiffin, 2000, p. 108). Rotuman scholar, Vilsoni Hereniko, describes his hybrid experience of the “contact zone” between his cultures as having:

illuminated a double exposure of myself that I had never been privy to before. What I saw was a man straddling two cultures (at least), neither one nor the other, but a
hybrid. To accept this image is to accept difference, to accept one’s identity, and to embrace a multicultural self. (Hereniko, 1995, p.7)

In the context of this study, and my practice as a Pasifika theatre-maker of afakasi Tongan-palangi heritage, ‘afakasi hybridity’ relates to “a new transcultural form specific to mixed-blood New Zealand based Pasifika people involved in thriving identity politics” (Marsh, 2012). I argue that it is this form of empowering, inclusive ‘hybridity’ politics that was the intended context for my production of *Mele Kanikau*.

‘Authenticity’ is also a problematic concept. Cultural authenticity in the field of post-colonial studies is difficult to define, and much more difficult to identify as it becomes “entangled in an essentialist cultural position in which fixed practices become iconized as authentically indigenous and others are excluded as hybridized or contaminated” (Ashcroft, Griffith, & and Tiffin, 2000, p. 17). In the opening scene of *Mele Kanikau*, one of the Waikiki dancers claims to have bought her plastic lei\(^\text{11}\) from “Nakaguchi’s Authentic Hawaiian Novelty Shop” (p. 102). *Mele Kanikau* is particularly concerned with what is culturally authentic in Hawai‘i, but also with what it means to live a personally authentic life. These are the challenges that confront the protagonist, Carl Alama, at the play’s end. Especially in the light of globalization and the international tourist market, ideas of what is “authentic” in the Pacific, and what is “indigenous” are so often linked that the two notions sometimes become compounded. The idea of the “authentic” and its correlation with the “indigenous” may be problematized within *Mele Kanikau*, alongside Wendt’s argument that “there is no state of cultural purity from which there is decline: usage determines authenticity” (Wendt, 1993, p. 12). In counterpoint to

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\(^{11}\)“garland, wreath, necklace of flowers” – (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 200)
the contradictory pull behind the idea of “authenticity” - that is, on the one hand its offer of a kind of protective and defensive cultural integrity; on the other, the way it is easily co-opted towards exclusionary essentialist ends - are Kneubuhl’s existentialist beliefs, and the complicated paradox of ‘theatrical authenticity.’ The concept of authenticity in the theatre compounds the issue of cultural authenticity further by acknowledging any action on the stage as illusion. Reading and producing Mele Kanikau is problematic in light of these definitions. Despite the fact that the themes of the play seem to point towards the demand for authenticity – cultural and otherwise – the play has conveyed these themes through the inherently artificial medium of theatre.

As a playwright invested in both his American and Samoan heritage, Kneubuhl’s theatre is transnational. The term “transnational” takes into account Hau’ofa’s seminal argument for the idea of the Pacific as “a sea of islands” (1994) with a specific relational, ocean-based regional identity. This concept of Pacific identity is opposed to being solely limited to land-based types of nationalism where the comparative smallness of the Pacific islands was seen as inferior to continental powers. Steven Yao, writing in Pacific Rim Modernisms writes that “transnational” means “embedded within and arising through a complex web of political, socio-economic, and other forces that exert their effects across and between boundaries defined and maintained by different nationa-states” (Yao, 2009, p.5). Kneubuhl’s transnationalism also takes into account the reciprocal nature of interrelated societies built on the importance of community. Hau’ofa argues that “evidence of the conglomerations of islands with their economies and cultures is readily available in the oral traditions of the islands, and in blood ties that are retained today...The sea was open to anyone who could navigate a way through” (Hau’ofa, 1994, p.154-5). Kneubuhl too, subverts forms of nationalism that separate the Pacific into small
islands by once again linking us through commonalities, bloodlines, languages and traditions specific to the Pacific. Otto Heim, writing specifically on Kneubuhl as a transnational theatre-maker, supports Hau’ofa’s argument for a change of perspective and incorporates into the notion of transnational theatre Wendt’s description of the vā as “the Space-Between-All-Things, which defines us” (Wendt, in Heim, 2012, p. 8). Heim argues that Kneubuhl’s playwriting is “likewise committed to nurturing a space of appearance as a condition for community and especially to stirring the remembrance that keeps this space alive and recognizes its transnational Oceanic foundation” (Heim, p.8).

The term “syncretic” can also be used to describe some aspects of Kneubuhl’s work. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin describe syncretism as “a term sometimes used to avoid the problems some critics have associated with the idea of hybridity in identifying the fusion of two distinct traditions to produce a new and distinctive whole” (2000, p. 210). Christopher Balme (1999) uses the term “syncretic theatre” to describe “the process whereby culturally heterogenous signs and codes are merged together” (p.1). Syncretism then, is a term used to avoid the negative connotations of “hybridity” but nevertheless recognizes the mixing of signs and codes from two or more distinct cultures. Syncretic theatre presents them in a single text – “in sync,” as it were. The various components of syncretic theatre are rendered harmonious by the term “syncretic theatre,” as opposed to what we might call “hybrid theatre” which has connotations of disharmony and of the various parts of a single whole working against, or in conflict with each other. *Mele Kanikau* is an example of syncretic theatre in which the metatheatre of *Fale Aitu* meshes effectively with the metatheatre of Modernist Western drama and the narrative drama of the hula; however, Kneubuhl’s texts are also hybrid, in an oppositional sense. Often, while the structures he employs work together to tell the story, the ideas that stem from
Kneubuhl’s dual cultures tussle with each other on the page and on the stage. *Mele Kanikau* seems to exalt the idea of being a “real” (equated to being traditional) Hawaiian, but condemns the Hawaiian *ali'i*; the play causes the audience to believe that the Waikiki hula pageant dancers are inauthentic, but then reveals that the “real” hula dancers from Noa’s *halau*, are ghosts; finally, through the hula – metonymic for Hawaiian culture - *Mele Kanikau* presents what seems to be a cultural deficit – these Waikiki characters cannot dance a “real” Hawaiian hula, so they are not “real” Hawaiians. Syncretism and hybridity are terms well applied to Kneubuhl as he draws on both traditional Western and Pacific theatre forms, melding them to create new works that incorporate Pacific languages and cultural texts (such as the Hawaiian hula) and makes them an integral part of the drama.

As a self-professed pan-Polynesian with a deep-seated belief in the potential of Polynesian theatre, John Kneubuhl negotiated and navigated the space, the place, and the *vā* of this Sea of Islands. He spent periods of his life in Hawai‘i (1934-37; 1946-49; 1973-76), on the United States mainland (Connecticut, 1938-42; Los Angeles, 1950-68) and in Tonga (1972-3). He learnt Japanese and included in his plays Polynesian, Japanese, Filipino, Irish, Chinese, and *papalagi* characters. Hau‘ofa’s Sea of Islands was Kneubuhl’s home and he himself was a practitioner of transnational, syncretic, post-colonial modernist theatre.

True to its underlying transnational, syncretic foundation, my production of *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant*, was a pan-Pasifika production. While the words “Polynesia”, “Pacific” and “Oceania” are tied to geographic locations, “Pasifika” is a term used in

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Aotearoa to identify those people from or descended from the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands. This definition includes those who, as part of the diaspora, migrated (or are descended from those who migrated) from their homelands as a result of colonialism in the Pacific. The term “Pasifika” is a locally infused term, specific to Aotearoa. Throughout this thesis the following definition of “Pasifika” will be used:

“Pasifika” is defined as a collective term used to refer to people of Pacific heritage or ancestry who have migrated or been born in Aotearoa New Zealand. Pasifika include recent migrants or first, second and subsequent generations of New Zealand born Pasifika men, women and children of single or mixed heritage (Ministry of Education, 2012).

On the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre website, Pasifika poet and academic Selina Tusitala Marsh uses the term ‘Pasifika’ “because it is inclusive and has been used from grassroots level and up to include all the Pacific Island nations as well as its diasporic community” (Marsh, 2005). Hau’ofa argues that “although our historical and cultural traditions are important elements of a regional identity, they are not in themselves sufficient to sustain that identity, for they exclude those whose ancestral heritage is elsewhere, and those who are growing up in non-traditional environments” (Hau’ofa, 2005, p.38). Because of the Pacific diaspora, many cities in the Pacific Islands are now home to people of different cultures and ethnicities, however Aotearoa, and particularly Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland, is notable for its range of diversity and demographic density of multicultural communities. Pasifika is a term which I use in this thesis to describe the production and cast of *Mele Kanikau*, wherein this rich diasporic diversity was reflected in the thirty-six actors, dancers, musicians and crew who identify variously as Fijian, Niuean, Tongan, Samoan, Rarotongan, Tuvaluan, Māori and Pakeha. While
Kneubuhl refers to Polynesians, and makes an argument for pan-Polynesian theatre making, Pasifika is the term I will use to describe my production and cast specifically. Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland is one of the few places in the world where it is possible for an afakasi Tongan director to work with such a diverse Pasifika cast to produce this Hawaiian play, written by an afakasi Samoan playwright.

The second key research question considers how the meta-drama of John Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau* functions to reveal, develop and problematize the drama of authenticity played out in the play. In answering this question I will examine Kneubuhl’s tutelage under Thornton Wilder and the way in which Modernist playwrights made dramatic use of the staging of theatre production roles within the staged fiction. In the trilogy of plays, Kneubuhl creates a character variously called The Writer (*Think of a Garden*), The Author (*Mele Kanikau*) and James Actor/James Alama (*A Play: A Play*). Consequently, this thesis investigates how such dramaturgy creates an initial frame for the creation of other frames.

**Mele Kanikau: A Pageant and my Production**

The main problem of *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* has been that, for the first twenty-three years of its existence, it was considered to be un-producible, the term Kneubuhl’s close confidante, John Enright, uses in a personal correspondence where he notes the reasons for Kneubuhl having “dropped ‘Mele Kanikau’ from the trilogy” (1994). Kneubuhl himself declared that not only was the show un-producible, but particularly un-producible in New Zealand. He doubted the ability of New Zealanders to hula in a professional manner: “There is no way New Zealanders can hula, especially since the play is about fake hula dancers, Waikiki hula dancers, and real authentic hula dancers. And it’s a kind of
competition between the two groups, so you’ve got to have very expert dancers” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). In 1998, Kumu Kahua theatre in Honolulu staged a student production of Mele Kanikau. The director, D Scott Woods, claimed that “it is possible to believe that until now, ‘Mele Kanikau’ could not have been staged anyway. Until the language came naturally, there may have been few who could carry off the principal role of kumu hula” (Kam, 1998, Honolulu Star Bulletin). What then, does it mean for the text that it was never staged close to the time it was written? Why did Kneubuhl write an un-stageable play? Why attempt to produce an un-stageable play? Moreover, how would I make this play work on an Aotearoa stage? Chapter Three addresses these questions comprehensively by examining the process of producing Mele Kanikau, where theory becomes substance, directly relational and responsive to the space, place and context of the play’s composition – 38 years later.

The following brief synopsis is offered as a point of reference for the rest of this thesis:

Mele Kanikau is set in the Hawaiian pageant world of Waikiki on the set of an upcoming hula pageant currently in rehearsal. On this set, a character “the Author of the play you are about to see... John Kneubuhl” (p. 99) introduces himself to the audience, breaking the fourth wall and immediately establishing both the meta-drama and “metaphysical shtick” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1999, p.116) that will frame the play. As the play progresses, the Author’s commentary on the play as it unfolds and his narrative of a woman named Georgina from his own past parallel the central action of the play. In this central action, and at the heart of Mele Kanikau is the story of an unresolved love triangle that has returned to, quite literally, haunt Carl Alama – the pageant director and the play’s protagonist.
Carl himself soon enters to address his cast of slick Waikiki hula dancers and a pageant court who are proudly descended from the Hawaiian ali‘i. The concert has a sense of being ‘fake’ and a hollow display, rather than a genuine performance of cultural practices. Carl tells them that there has been a change in choreographer and it is soon revealed that Carl has hired the controversial recluse and kumu hula, Noa Napo‘oana’akala, to oversee the pageant and infuse the performance with genuine Hawaiian culture. This appointment arouses discontent in the cast, particularly from Lydia Jenkins, who plays the pageant queen and is especially proud and defensive of her ali‘i bloodline. Noa and his “haole mistress”, Frances Corrington, soon arrive with their hula halau, whose “Hawaiian-ness” is immediately positioned in opposition to that of the Waikiki pageant dancers. It is revealed that Frances was once betrothed to Carl.

Noa immediately creates scandal and uproar by drinking openly in front of the cast, by disappearing to the bathroom accompanied by two boys and by firing the Waikiki dancers after he watches a small portion of their performance declaring that the word “shit” – blurted out by the technician – is the appropriate word to describe them. Throughout the play, Noa condemns Carl, Lydia and the pageant cast for being culturally inauthentic and for prostituting the Hawaiian culture for the sake of tourism.

The story of what transpired many years ago between Noa, Carl, and Frances is gradually revealed and discussed by these three main characters and it becomes clear to the audience that much has been left unresolved. The emotions of these characters are simmering just below the surface and each of them is struggling to maintain their composure. Noa is a heavy drinker and is at one stage overcome by the mo‘o who possess

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13 "hula master or teacher" (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 88).
him and in a wild hula performed with his halau, he beats Frances and attempts to rape Charles Kelsoe, the stage manager of the pageant. Frances is defensive of Noa and reveals her own fears of what is described as the “murmuring darkness” (p. 143), unexplained until later. Carl suggests to Frances that he still has feelings for her and only hired Noa as an excuse to see her again. An explosive confrontation occurs over what it means to be a “real” Hawaiian occurs between Lydia and Frances.

In Noa’s re-writing of the pageant, he adds Hawaiian ʻōlelo to Carl’s speech which Carl struggles with, emphasizing his discomfort with “real” Hawaiian culture. At the play’s climax, Noa has his halau perform the legendary tale of the young aliʻi, Kahikiloa, his love for the beautiful Kea and his betrayal by his best friend, Laupiʻo. Carl recognizes this as the true story of the events between himself, Noa and Frances and he becomes enraged at Noa. Noa then turns to blame the rest of the pageant court for their part in driving Carl’s son – who, he claims, he and Frances both gave birth to – to suicide. Carl’s frustration at this blatant untruth escalates and he fires Noa, who leaves the pageant set with Frances and their halau.

However, Carl is then shaken when the financial backer of the pageant arrives on the set and announces that Noa Napoʻoanaʻakala and his wife and halau were killed in an accident earlier that morning. This causes Carl to realize that the ghosts of Noa and Frances and their halau had returned for him, to “leave [him] with [their] aloha” (p. 173). Determined that he will learn to live more authentically, Carl quits the pageant, and after one last fiery confrontation with Lydia, he too departs the Waikiki set.

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The Author addresses the audience again, as he has done throughout the play, and reminds us to “listen…always listen…and remember. For it is only in our remembering that we can make our mele, like houses of words into which our dead can move and live again and speak to us” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p. 175). “Mele Kanikau” literally translates to “anthem of lamentation” (Johnson, 1997, p.260). The play laments what has been lost in Hawai‘i and by her people, and it is loss – “historical, political, and cultural loss, private and temporal loss, and artistic and creative loss” (Edmond, 1998, p. 480) that drives the play and underscores this thesis.

**Michelle Johansson and the Problem of Active Creativity**

As the active creative in the writing of this thesis and in the directing and producing of the creative component, I am personally and professionally invested in this research in a number of ways additional to my capacity as a Doctoral candidate.

Like Kneubuhl, I am an educator, with a special interest in Pasifika āko. In this respect, Kneubuhl’s use of the theatre as a teaching space and his more overt campaign for bilingual Samoan education in Samoa (unpacked further in Chapter Two) resonates strongly with my teaching philosophy. While teaching is not the direct focus of this thesis, my teaching and learning practice is also central to my theatre-making. Kneubuhl’s commitment to indigenous Polynesian ways of being and knowing are likewise reflected in my production of *Mele Kanikau*. This will be elaborated further in the production story in Chapter Three.

Most importantly however, I am a Pasifika theatre maker and one of the co-founders of South Auckland based Polynesian theatre troupe the Black Friars. This company was formed in 2006 from a desire to challenge the dominant stereotypes
surrounding Pasifika people. Over the past ten years, the company has written and produced shows for the NZ International Comedy Festival and Auckland Fringe Festival; worked in churches and communities on youth suicide prevention; and conducted workshops for teachers and students around the Pacific. The company is determined to tell stories that matter to Polynesian people in Aotearoa, and to make existing stories relevant to us.

We are educators and counsellors, facilitators and enablers, theatre-makers and storytellers. Embracing these multiple identities constitutes the fabric of our company. We are proud to be pan-Polynesian, poly-vocal performers invested in the construction of identity for Pasifika people. We work in communities to encourage young people to tell stories that matter to them. In our theatre work, we also investigate questions of representation, loss and heritage vital to the survival of Pasifika culture in the diaspora (Johansson, 2014, p.11).

Kneubuhl’s work resonates significantly with the work of the Black Friars, which in turn, constitutes my contribution to the field of Pasifika theatre in Aotearoa. Kneubuhl scholar, Associate Professor Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard, argues that Kneubuhl’s work “offers the light of perspective from Ancient Oceania – that one’s identity is a work in progress, continually being woven from the fibres of lineage, heart and volition.” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000). As an Oceanian, as a Pasifikan, as a Polynesian firmly rooted in the turangawaewae16 of Aotearoa, these fibres and this weaving are integral to my theatre-making and to this thesis. As one of my playwriting forebears, I owe a significant debt to Kneubuhl. In Tongan culture, this debt might be expressed as my fua kavenga. Literally

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16 “Turangawaewae” is usually translated from Māori to mean, “place to stand,” evoking whakapapa and whanau, as well as indicating a physical place of origin. It is literally translated by Ryan in the Raupo Dictionary of Modern Maori as “domicile, home, home turf” (2008, p. 350).
this translates to “carry responsibility,” but much of the wider meaning is lost in this translation. Tongan Theologian, Nāsili Vaka’uta, defines fua kavenga, as: “fulfilling ones duties and obligations to families, neighbours and to those within the kāinga network...It is about acknowledging the fact we are interdependent. To ignore your duties gives the impression that you do not care and do not need the support of the kāinga with whom you share the fale” (2010, p.7, italics and footnotes added). As the active creative native in this thesis and its creative corpus, I acknowledge my duty to pay back to those who have gone before and my duty to pay forward to those who will come after. As Hereniko claims, “this is the least I can do, for I have benefited from the trail those before me blazed” (1995, p.11).

**Methodology: Practice, Research, and Analysis in Structuring the Thesis**

Considering who, what and how I carried out the research in this thesis, it was pivotal to use Pasifika methodologies. It is culturally appropriate that I acknowledge the critical lineage in the making of this thesis and place myself in the research. My Tongan family name is Matalave, and my mother, ‘Ilaisaane ‘Eniketi moved to Aotearoa in 1975 from a small village called Fatai on the main island of Tongatapu. I wished to acknowledge this heritage in this thesis, and this meant endeavoring to find a Tonga way of describing my research and research journey.

A fitting means of weaving my own research is expressed in the metaphor of the Tongan fine mat, which, when worn, becomes a kie. This methodology works on several
levels. Metaphors or *heliaki*\(^9\) are important in the Tongan language and provide ways of culturally conceptualizing that make ‘sense’ to cultural insiders. Karlo Mila-Schaaf writes, “the use of metaphor and figurative language to speak indirectly about difficult things...has been identified as culturally resonant for Pacific peoples and an effective way of communicating therapeutically with Pacific peoples in contemporary contexts” (2014, Manuscript in preparation). Tongan anthropologist Tevita Ka’ili claims that weaving metaphors are particularly used in the Tongan language to describe the interconnectedness of people and genealogy “as in the Tongan expression, “‘Oku hangē ‘a e tangata ha fala ‘oku lālanga” (Mankind is like a mat being woven)” (Ka’ili, 2005, p.90-1).

Thus, the *kie* is a visually appropriate symbol for Kneubuhl’s work and for my interrogation of his plays through this thesis. If we consider the appearance of the mat, it has multiple and overlapping strands that travel in two oppositional directions, but these strands are woven so tightly that they become inseparable. The strands ‘speak’ to each other continuously. They are laid over and under, and together they are stronger than a single strand alone. In the context of this thesis, the two directions for the strands represent Kneubuhl’s *totolua*, or his ‘two bloods.’ For Kneubuhl, cultural identity is much more complicated than being the child of a Samoan mother and an American father. The theatre and performance traditions that inform his work are aesthetically representative of his ‘two bloods.’ His education at Yale Drama School and his tutelage in Modernist theatre are integral to his work. However, within this Western tradition, he writes Polynesian stories in Polynesian ways. He was also deeply influenced by his Polynesian

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\(^9\) Metaphor, or “to speak ironically, or to say one thing and mean another” – (Tongan: Churchward, 1959, p. 219).
roots, and he makes use of the form and character traditions of *Fale Aitu*. Both of these strands – Western theatre and Polynesian theatre – weave in and out of his work and through the play *Mele Kanikau*. Both forms are consciously meta-theatrical and aware of their own status as performance. The *kie* is a fitting metaphor for Kneubuhl’s interwoven cultural heritage and the final product is not without conflict. In fact, it is this conflict, rendered theatrically, that is the genius of his play-making. The two worlds that are interwoven are often in direct opposition. This *kie* represents physically the nature of the contested spaces in which Kneubuhl operates. The *kie* methodology is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

The imagery of weaving has been applied to Kneubuhl’s work before. In her review of the playscript, Sinavaiana-Gabbard notes that “Kneubuhl’s layers of story and theme continually speak to and across each other, weaving in and out of the text like the fibres of a pandanus mat” (1999, p. 117), and that “in the final speech, the Author addresses us directly to re-weave the play’s metaphysical threads into a haunting statement of his poetics” (p. 117). To this imagery, I add Albert Wendt’s notion of the continuity of relationships between Polynesians and their ancestors: “our dead are woven into our souls like the hypnotic music of bone flutes. We cannot escape them. If we let them, they can help illuminate us to ourselves and to each other” (1993, p. 10). Like the final lines of *Mele Kanikau*, “it is only in our remembering that we can make our mele, like houses of words into which the dead can move and live again and speak to us” (p. 175), Wendt’s statement and my *kie* are conscious of those that have gone before, and those who we lament and celebrate in the gift of this performance.

This thesis is woven in an introduction, four chapters, and conclusion. The Introduction sets out the research questions and the unique contribution I hope to make
to English and Drama Studies in the course of this creative and critical research. The first chapter outlines the literature review and further develops the methodology. Chapter Two: “the world’s greatest Swiss/Welsh/Samoan playwright” gives an overview of Kneubuhl’s personal, professional and creative history to apply his thoughts on playwriting to the composition of *Mele Kanikau*; to address the substantial gap between its composition and the other trilogy plays; and to discuss the manifestation of Kneubuhl’s *afakasi* heritage in *Mele Kanikau*. Chapter Three: Building “houses of words” tells the story of my production of Kneubuhl’s play as an act of both creative and critical research. Chapter Four: *E nā kānaka o kā āina* takes five lines from the playscript and examines how multiple close readings of the play are integral to a holistic understanding of the importance of Kneubuhl’s dramatic works. The conclusion: *Ha’ina ʻia mai ana ka puana* takes its title from the customary final line of the hula, translated in *Mele Kanikau* as “the summary refrain is being told” (p.175). In this chapter, the final strands of the *kie* are woven together to address the questions of representation and authenticity that underpin the research questions and the work of the thesis as a whole.

**STAND BY FOR BEGINNERS...**

In 2009, I met with critically acclaimed theatre-maker, Nathaniel Lees – director of both of the Aotearoa-based productions of *Think of a Garden*. His first words to me were: “We have been waiting for you to come to us.” The “you” was I - a new Pasifika theatre maker, attempting to start a company of young Polynesians to create striking, relevant, and culturally significant theatre in Aotearoa. The “we” referred to the old guard - those long-established actors and directors who fought for Polynesian voices - our voices - to be heard
on our stages. Lees spoke of playwrights and performers working in the Pacific between our meeting in 2009 stretching back to that first production of *Think of a Garden* in 1993, having defined it then as “the play that I had spent all my acting life working towards” (Taki Rua Theatre, 1993). Lees said that Kneubuhl’s work continues to represent the tip of the mountain, an insurmountable and unattainable peak – the Everest of Pasifika theatre-making.

On the island of Hawai‘i, the tallest mountain is *Mauna Kea*. In Hawaiian mythology, the peaks of the mountain are sacred and only the greatest and most learned chiefs may climb them. Jackie Pualani Johnson described *Mauna Kea* to me as a very beautiful and graceful woman, like a hula dancer reclining.

These mountain images provide a fitting metaphor on which to begin this PhD thesis.

Here I am.

Wrapped in my *kie*.

Ready to climb the mountain.
Chapter One

Weaving the *kie*: Review of Literary and Theatrical Sources and of Methodology
In this chapter I begin the weaving of the *kie* methodology and indicate how this theoretical framework is adopted in response to existing Pasifika research paradigms. Following the methodology is the weaving of the literature review, which describes first the world theatre and Pasifika performance practices identified and utilized by Kneubuhl in his work, and then describes more specifically the context of Oceanic, Pasifika and Aotearoa-based theatre-making in which his work and the creative component of this PhD might be contextualised. In the literature review I also indicate the history of Kneubuhl scholarship, the landmark studies of his work and the original creative and critical contribution I hope to make in the weaving of this thesis.

As I described in the introduction, I wanted to find a specifically Tongan way of presenting this research which not only fit the field of research in English literature and Drama Studies, but also Pasifika theatre-making and performance.

A research methodology that has its roots in Pasifika education theory is *Tīvaevae*, popularised by Teremoana Maua-Hodge's Tīvaevae Model (2000) and used by Emma
Powell in her Masters research titled *Stitching to the back-bone: a Cook Islands literary tivaivai* (2013). This research framework has always appealed to me as it is directly applicable to the process of thesis writing about literature rather than qualitative and quantitative means of gathering data from participants. This methodology uses Cook Island *tīvaevae* as the metaphor for the thesis and includes the stages of sourcing, gathering and selecting appropriate materials, designing the quilt and its patterns, laying it up, sewing it together and then presenting it to the community for acceptance. This is close to what I want to achieve with my research, and this gathering of resources and the presentation to the community are an important part of the process for me.

However, using a specifically Cook Island methodology felt like a cultural mismatch. I wanted to place myself in the research, as not only the writer, but a theatre-maker who has been influenced by Kneubuhl’s work and one who wished to include Pasifika ways of making meaning in my theatre practice as well as my academic practice, and also importantly, as a Tongan. This meant endeavouring to find a Tongan way of describing my research and research journey. In her PhD thesis, written in 1988, Professor Konai Helu Thaman introduced the *Kakala* methodology that has since been developed by other scholars, notably by Taufe’ulungaki, Johansson Fua, Manu, and Takapautolo in 2007. This way of researching uses the metaphor of the *kakala*, a collection of flowers that are woven together as a garland and presented as a gift. *Kakala* methodology involves the *toli*, which is the picking of the flowers; the *tui*, which is weaving these flowers together.

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20 Powell acknowledges “the discourse surrounding the orthographic debate concerning the appropriate spelling of the craft” and chooses to use the “vai” ending as opposed to the “vae” - the former meaning “to patch, to mend” and the latter meaning “to wrap up, to enclose” – as most appropriate to her thesis (Powell, 2013, p. 4).

21 “Tīvaevae are colourful hand-sewn and sometimes machine-sewn bed coverings or quilts... The word ‘tīvaevae’ comes from the transitive verb ‘tīvae’, meaning to patch, to mend by putting on or inserting a piece, to make up of pieces’” (Cook Island Māori: Hutton, 2002, p.65).
and then the **luva** – finally presenting the **kakala** (Maka, Johansson Fua and Pene, 2006). In 2009, Johansson Fua described a six stage process derived from **Kakala** that has been widely used as a Pasifika research methodology in education.

Each of these methodologies has cultural and academic merit – **kakala** methodology in particular – and I borrow elements of both the **tīvaevae** and **kakala** methodologies in my research, but reconfigure them to reflect ways of creating a **kie**. This includes taking into account the importance of the materials, and of sourcing, gathering, preparing and bringing together the flax fibres and the decorative feathers, beads, sequins and other trimmings, as well as the design of the **kie**. Just as the fineness and quality of the weave determines its value, so too do the findings, synthesis, argument and quality of writing, performance and production determine the value of the contribution of this thesis to the fields of English and Drama Studies.

The most important and powerful objects in Tonga are **kie hingoa** ‘named fine mats’ made of plaited pandanus leaves in “the long ago” by unknown hands. They are heirlooms passed from generation to generation as treasures, **to’onga**...and are worn or presented during weddings, funerals, investitures, and commemorative events by members of the Tongan monarchy and aristocracy, who trace their ancestry to the god Tangaloa. (Kaepleer, 1999, p. 168)

The **kie** is an item of cultural significance and mana. While I would never claim that the **kie** that I am weaving and then wearing is a **kie hingoa**, Kaepleer’s statement about the generational passing of **kie** and the notion of the **kie** as a treasure, or **to’onga**, imbued with mana ring true. **Kie** are woven with skills that are passed along intergenerationally between grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and daughters, and the weaving of these mats is often undertaken collectively. It is not a process undertaken in isolation and nor
is my thesis. The skills, with which to weave mats, to tell stories, analogous to those required to write and produce plays, are highly valued culturally. The mats themselves are passed down through the generations – indeed, this adds to their value. This element of intergenerationality fits with my kaupapa as a theatre practitioner and an educator – that we reach back and pull forward and that we have important links that must be nurtured and maintained. On page 21 I cited Wendt’s definition of the vā as the “the Space-Between-All-Things which defines us” and the Samoan notion of teu le vā, means that all parties in a relationship have an obligation “to value, nurture and if necessary, ‘tidy up’ the physical, spiritual, cultural, social, psychological and tapu ‘spaces’ of human relationships” (Anae, 2010, p.2). Likewise, in Tongan culture, the corresponding concept of tauhi vā means that Tongans have “a commitment to sustain harmonious social relations with kin and kin-like members” (Ka’ili, 2005, p.92). Underpinning both teu le vā and tauhi vā is a dedication to nurturing the relationships between people and a commitment to acknowledge the shoulders on which we (Pasifika people) stand. Just as kie are passed down in family lines, Pasifika practitioners in particular, often feel compelled to pass down what they have learned. Hereniko describes the need “to tell other Pacific Islanders interested in travelling the same road to take comfort in the knowledge that one of them has been on it before, and has left a map that they can use, modify, or discard as they choose” (Hereniko, 1995, p.11). Similarly, poet/scholars Karlo Mila-Schaaf and Selina Tusitala Marsh refer to their fua kavenga in their honorific poetry. Notably, the last verse of Marsh’s signature poem ‘Fast Talkin’ PI’ (Marsh, 2009, p.58-65), which functions as an invocation of iconic Pasifika texts and authors, and ‘Circle of Stones’ (Marsh, 2009, p.33-34) in which the voice of the poem describes the “sowing” and “reaping” of Pasifika women poets tied to the circle of stones belonging to the Fale Pasifika
complex at the University of Auckland where *Mele Kanikau* was staged. Likewise, Mila-Schaaf’s poems ‘For Albert Wendt’ (2005, p.15); ‘For Sia Figiel’ (2005, p.13); ‘For John Pule’ (2005, p.16) and ‘For Alice Walker’ (2005, p.17) are evidence of the poet’s desire to pay back to those who have influenced her. These instances are examples of Pasifika practitioners bearing their *fua kavenga*, engaged in the acts of passing their own *kie* down to the poets, scholars, or artists who will follow them.

As a prized cultural item, the *kie* might also be laid down with other materials as a gift or a marker of a significant event. The mats are passed on at weddings to mark a union, at christenings to mark a birth, but also at funerals – to mark significant loss and passing. *Mele Kanikau* does this also, marking both personal and collective cultural loss. The title of *Mele Kanikau* means “anthem of lamentation” (Johnson, 1997, p.260) and while *mele* are a particular element of Hawaiian culture, the theme of loss is important in all Polynesian cultures. In Tongan culture, the exchange of *kie* is also used to signify one last message of *ofa*²² between the dead and the living.

*Kie* have another important function that seems pertinent to my work. They are also worn as a form of body adornment. The *kie* is a spiritually and culturally significant item and is worn on special occasions and on Sundays to church. It is the appropriate way to show respect for place and people. *Kie* are folded to an appropriate length and wrapped around the wearer. Feathers and other decorative items are positioned according to the occasion. They are worn either invisibly, on the side turned to the wearer’s body, or turned outward to show festivity. The *kie* circles the body and is tied with a *kafa*,²³ which may be

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²² “love; kindness; affection” - (Tongan: Tu’inukuafe, 1992, p.203).
²³ woven rope/hair/string that wraps around the *kie*, tying it to the wearer’s waist. Defined by Churchward in 1959 as “sennit(string or rope made of coconut fibre); plaited in various ways” - (Tongan: 1959, p. 242).
woven from the hair of a female ancestor. It is therefore a personal and spiritual item, crafted from the living bodies of the wearer’s loved ones. The kafa is literally a part of the wearer’s family, binding this tangible part of the living culture to the body. Kie may be used to adorn a bride, a graduand, or a performer. The word for any form of Tongan performance, whether poem, play or dance is “faiva.” And when the performer dons the kie it is the performance itself, the faiva that then becomes the gift. Therefore, the kie is not just an appropriate metaphorical item, but involves an entire cultural practice that is drawn upon for this methodology.

My production of Mele Kanikau was also a gift. As a performance of the work of a deceased Polynesian writer, it functions as a tribute and a remembrance as evident in the last lines of the play which caution us to “listen, always listen and remember, for it is only in our remembering that we can make our mele kanikau” (p.175). The kie of my thesis and this performance are a way of listening and they are a gift, laid down to mark loss and performed to show respect and give honour. In terms of my theatre kaupapa, like the strands that are overlaid, I intend to reach back and pull forward and to gift to future theatre-makers, particularly Pasifika practitioners, an idea of what Kneubuhl accomplished through his playwriting and his mastery of weaving together different and often conflicting aesthetic influences.

The weaving of the kie must begin by identifying the strands that will be used to weave this new contribution to knowledge in the field of English and Drama. In this chapter, which describes the methodology and literature review, I begin by gathering fibres taken from world theatre and from Pacific world views as they apply to Kneubuhl’s work. These include Modernism and Metadrama, as well as strands from Kneubuhl’s studies at Yale Drama School. I begin to gather these together with some of the discourse
of specifically Pasifika performance practices. Once the fibres from these fields have been singled out and prepared, I weave them through the act of creative research. The kie becomes finer in the literature review as I weave through Oceanic literature and theatre practices, and finer still through the genre of Pacific theatre in Aotearoa. The flax fibres that contribute to this weaving include archival research of Kneubuhl’s life and playwriting and an investigation of the relationships between twentieth century performance theory and contemporaneous developments in existential philosophy in relationship to Mele Kanikau. Once the kie is woven, it is my task to put it on and perform the faiva. This is my production of Mele Kanikau. As it is when donning a kie, I am aided by family and friends who dress me, oil me, and ready me to perform. This forms the content of Chapter Three in the production story. Finally, in Chapter Four, the kie is made ready to gift. This involves ceremony and speeches, which take the form of six different readings of the play, enabled only through its production.

GATHERING THE STRANDS

Two of the key strands identified in the kie are world theatre, and Pasifika performance practices. These are the strands that Kneubuhl himself wove together in his work, and which I take up in a critical sense to overlay on Kneubuhl’s work. Embedded in these strands is the relationship between twentieth century performance theory and contemporaneous developments in philosophy. The connections between Kneubuhl’s philosophy of theatre, the production of Mele Kanikau, and theatrical notions of authenticity are explored, expounded, and woven through the thesis. Kneubuhl was educated in Western theatre at Yale Drama School and believed that “stage is magic, stage is illusionary, stage is a big ‘if-ness’” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), and this idea is
considered in conjunction with the philosophical frame of Existentialism which Kneubuhl believed integral to his theatre:

If there is a God and he’s not dead like...Dostoevsky and Nietzsche said, you know, is he a being? And along come the existentialists and they say nothing is a ‘being’, it’s a ‘becoming’...which I suddenly realized is what I unconsciously and inarticulately believed...all creation is a process of becoming...and the artist is an integral part of that world and is perhaps our best interpreter (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

This part of the research helps to form my response to the questions of meta-drama and authenticity with a specific focus on how Kneubuhl’s theatre speaks to and about the Polynesian world. Kneubuhl says of playwriting, “it is our search for our authentic self...Everyone’s all caught up in the search for reclaiming identities” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). This search for the “authentic act” in the theatre is central to twentieth century theory and practice.

Preparation of the kie

Preparing the beads and feathers that decorate the kie and add to its value is an important process. I have been greatly privileged to be able to include as well as library-based resources, written material from Kneubuhl’s family, friends and colleagues. I have thus been able to create a lens for seeing Kneubuhl’s work in its gestation period and to consider how this contributed to the development of his dramaturgy. The archival research included two research trips. The first was to Hawai‘i in October of 2012; and the second to Yale library in 2014. The 2012 Hawai‘i trip allowed me to meet with Victoria Kneubuhl (Hawaiian playwright and Kneubuhl’s niece) on O‘ahu and with Jackie Pualani...
Johnson (Head of Theatre, University of Hawai‘i) on Hilo. I was able to collect copies of some of Kneubuhl’s unpublished plays, an earlier draft of *Mele Kanikau* referenced in the following chapter, Kneubuhl’s personal correspondence with other playwrights, and his lecture notes on playwriting, among various other written material and photographs. Yale University Library houses the two plays that Kneubuhl wrote as a student at Yale. My trip to Yale in 2014 allowed me to visit the Haas Arts Library Special Collections and study the production scripts of *Saint Mac* and *The Sunset Crowd*, both of which were staged in New Haven by Yale Drama School in 1941 and 1942 respectively. These beads and feathers add value and mana to the thesis.

**Wearing the kie: Performing the faiva**

My production of *Mele Kanikau* was the act of creative research that made this written thesis possible and constituted 40 percent of my PhD research. As well as forming the *faiva* performed in and gifted with the *kie*, the production was a vital means of critical interrogation. In the role of the director, my work included creating the frames of the play realized in its performance. The frames included the conceptualisation and physical creation of three distinct dramatic spaces:

1. A theatre within the space of the University of Auckland’s Fale Pasifika;
2. A pageant theatre within that theatre;
3. A space where the living and the dead might ‘perform’ together.

The demarcation of one space from another was a concept that I discussed with the lighting designer and the set designer and is discussed in the third chapter of the thesis. Other frames were the multiple layers of story, through which the free floating reality of the Author character forms both a bridge and a barrier for the audience into the world of
the story. One of the more problematic scenes to stage involved the character Noa’s performance of a hula that needed to be shocking to the pageant characters who were the onstage audience witnessing it. Additionally, it needed to cast the theatre audience as witnesses who, in turn, needed to be aware of the shocking nature of this hula, but without themselves being affected by the shocking act in the same way the onstage audience were. The audience participated in a kind of ‘double-seeing’ where they were witnessing, but also witnessing the witnesses. In Brechtian terms, it was true in the production that “the spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters” (Brecht, ca. 1936, p. 174). I worked throughout the production to enable and enhance this critical double-seeing by the audience that did not focus on creating empathy with the audience, but rather – through Kneubuhl’s script – allowed Brecht’s concept of alienation to occur. Another complex scene involved the pageant cast performing a polished, Waikiki hula that needed to be seen by three different groups in three different ways simultaneously. To the onstage pageant audience, the hula had to be polished, mechanically perfect and beautiful; to Noa and his hula halau, the Waikiki hula needed to seem like a poor mockery and a betrayal of ‘authentic’ Hawaiian culture; and to the audience of my production, this hula needed to be seen as both of these things. The meta-theatre of the play creates many complexities that were resolved in the production of Mele Kanikau and these will be expanded on later in the thesis.

**GIFTING THE KIE**

Fine mats and kie are exchanged or gifted on celebratory occasions: “Almost without exception at all major life events – weddings, title investitures, and funerals – the
exchange of mats is an essential element of the ceremonial proceedings. Fine mats legitimise an occasion, dignify proceedings, and confirm social, kinship, and cosmological relationships” (Pereira, 2002, p.79). The final preparation before the gifting of this kie takes the form of the post-production analysis, which brings together the other approaches through a series of readings of the play enabled by its production. The post-production analysis in Chapter Four locates the production within several dramatic discourses, picking up the earlier strands introduced here in the literature review. Here the multi-layered and intersecting nature of the storylines is examined.

**Literature Review: Selecting the Strands**

My intention in this literature review is to describe some of the Western and Polynesian performance traditions that Kneubuhl drew from in his theatre making; to identify some of the theatre-making practices, plays and playwrights amongst whose work Kneubuhl’s is situated and to ascertain the particular place for his plays and my production of *Mele Kanikau* in the genre of Pacific theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As identified above, the first task in making the kie is to gather the strands. I must acknowledge this as a double act – well-suited to work in the theatre. Kneubuhl himself chose the strands to gather, and I am following the paths his hands made and contextualizing his selections creatively and academically in the work of this thesis. I might say that this is an intergenerational act where the placement of his hands guides me; and the strands he gathered are re-gathered by me to contribute to the work of this thesis. Together then, we select threads from *Fale Aitu*, from Modernism and from Metatheatre, from hula traditions of practice, and from the smaller subset of work comprised of Kneubuhl’s influences at Yale Drama School in the early 1940s.
PACIFIC INFLUENCES: FALE AITU

The *Fale Aitu* Kneubuhl experienced in American Samoa as a child influenced him greatly. He claimed that this theatre was socially curative, meta-theatrical drama that served many of the purposes of psychodrama (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

*Fale Aitu* may be defined literally as “house of spirits” or “spirit house.” Sinavaiana-Gabbard, as author of some of the most comprehensive writings on the subject defines *Fale Aitu* comedy sketches as:

satirical interludes, which are scripted orally, rehearsed, then performed in public with much improvisation by a small troupe of players, who are generally men in their youth or early middle age. These village comics are trained and directed by the most accomplished comedian among them as rehearsals for the sketches proceed. Plots are often marked by the humourous ridicule of authority figures who are dramatically epitomized through the use of caricature and parody. In the plays, normative status roles are reversed: the high is made low, the world is temporarily turned upside down, as characterized in carnival traditions elsewhere (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1999, p.186).

However, definitions of this form of comedy vary. For example, while Kneubuhl states that “Samoan clowns are not possessed by a spirit” (Hereniko, 1994, p.102), his niece, playwright Victoria Kneubuhl, argues that “the fa’aluma [chief clown] is given the privilege of ridiculing even the highest chief, and he is accorded this privilege because he is thought to be possessed by a ghost or spirit (aitu)” (Kneubuhl, V., 1987, p.171). While scholars of both literature and theatre disagree on many of the conventions of *Fale Aitu*,
most concur that it is poly-vocal in nature, with direct, contemporary, social significance and certain societal sanctions (Hereniko, 1994, p.102; Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1999, p.183-4; Pearson, 2005, p.559; Simei-Barton, 1997, p.76). Shore (1977,78), Kneubuhl (1987) and Sinavaiana-Gabbard (1992) agree that Fale Aitu sketches “serve as an informal avenue for resolving conflict, with less emphasis on vicarious gratification of sexual impulses” (Hereniko, 1992, p. 169). Kneubuhl describes the license to ridicule as a “privilege,” a desirable ability accorded to the fa’aluma whereby he can provide social and political commentary. “The humour of Fale Aitu performance is satirical and irreverent. The fa’aluma is given the privilege of ridiculing the highest chief...” (p.171). This license may be used to negotiate power positions or address contemporary issues and concerns.

A Fale Aitu troupe would move into a village, learn the social problems facing the people, “improvise their sketches from the village gossip” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), and exorcise these issues by way of laughter. Kneubuhl argues that “the Fale Aitu is...more like psychodrama, but done with an emphasis on comedy, and it’s curative theatre. It’s the curative power of laughter” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Describing what happens when a Fale Aitu troupe arrives at a village he says:

they would...get all of the things the village is trying to repress by talking behind everybody’s back, and the aggrieved family, would be asked, like the faife’au’s wife, the boy’s mother, would be asked to play the woman from the next village, with which her son is having the affair, you know...so that the family had to act out, it’s like a psychodrama, and a great deal of what was repressed in the village was acted out and laughed away, and you’re being laughed at and you have no escape except to laugh at yourself along with them, it’s very curative (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).
This description highlights the license awarded to *Fale Aitu* clowns, as well as the psychodrama that is exercised in this particular theatre form. Theatre hovers between misrule and censorship. Hereniko, writing on Polynesian clowning describes “the way the clown’s outrageous antics and bawdy language remind us of a part of ourselves we continually suppress in day-to-day interactions in order to appear respectable and acceptable to the majority” (1995, p. 7). Kneubuhl posits that even children clowning in *Fale Aitu* “served a psychological curative purpose, and we kind of all knew it, when we were kids, that aitu are being laughed out of existence, even the aitu in you” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This curative power of laughter rather than a model of possession-exorcism appealed to Kneubuhl. The role of the *Fale Aitu* clown and the license granted to him are typical of the role of the “wise fool” present in many literary forms from across cultures. Kneubuhl would have been aware of the role of the clown or the fool in theatre and some of this licence to criticize is evident in the character of Noa in *Mele Kanikau*.

Kneubuhl makes another significant claim about *Fale Aitu* when he describes its metaphysical nature. He argued that his understanding of *Fale Aitu* was a part of his larger ideas about theatre-making: “there’s a wide range from what I call almost metaphysical notions of the theatre, from which I’ve built my own private aesthetic of what a place should be, from *Fale Aitu* to fairly mundane, straight, funny pieces” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). In *Fale Aitu* “the one theme that constantly repeats itself...is the mocking of theatre itself. So that, in the moment you start mocking theatre, you expose it for what it is and it’s an artifice, so that the reality of the theatre is exposed for being an unreality” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This experience of a theatre that was constantly “mocking itself” meshed with the Modernist notions of meta-theatre that
Kneubuhl met later in his studies at Yale. Kneubuhl’s use of meta-theatre in *Mele Kanikau* will be explored more fully in Chapter Four.

**World Theatre: Yale, Brecht & Pirandello**

As the convenor of the 47 workshop at Yale University, prolific author, playwright and multiple Pulitzer Prize-winner, Thornton Wilder had a profound effect on Kneubuhl as a young playwright. This influence is evident in all of Kneubuhl’s plays, surprising even the playwright himself with the way in which Wilder’s work insinuated itself into Kneubuhl’s plays. Kneubuhl said, “I went to see... *Our Town*. That knocked me out. That did it. That just absolutely floored me. That was the first real play that just said, ‘Magic theatre, here I am’” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Years later Kneubuhl claimed that “I embarrass myself when, ten years after I’ve written a play, I reread it and I say ‘my god...that’s straight out of...Thornton Wilder’” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl’s work resonates with the early twentieth century Modernist fragmentation of traditional ways of presenting and representing in art and artforms. Robert Leach, University of Edinburgh drama lecturer and theatre director, argues that “Modernism is usually – and correctly – associated with startling novelty, with art which deliberately shocks or which deliberately – even joyfully – breaks conventions. It is often designed to be partial, contentious, and challenging” (Leach, 2004, p. 1). Certainly the trajectory of Kneubuhl’s breaking of conventions can be traced though the *Think of a Garden* trilogy, from the presence of the Writer and the Author on stage in *Think of a Garden* and *Mele Kanikau* respectively through to the questioning of the theatre and life as artifice in *A Play: A Play*. This device also shows Kneubuhl’s use of Brechtian elements “the use of placards, the half-curtain, exposing the source of lighting, the direct address
to the audience...when a character stops speaking and begins to sing, interrupting himself, as it were” (Leach, p. 119). In Wilder’s *Some Thoughts on Playwrighting* (1941), the playwright outlines four “fundamental conditions of the drama”:

1. The theatre is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators;
2. It is addressed to the group-mind;
3. It is based upon a pretense and its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretenses;
4. Its action takes place in a perpetual time.

(Wilder, 1941, p. 258-9)

Wilder’s third condition, and particularly his reference to the “multiplication of pretenses” is a teaching that the young Kneubuhl took on board and is borne out in all of his later plays.

Kneubuhl was also heavily influenced by meta-theatrical devices and traditions readily associated with Modernism. This attention to and awareness of the play that acknowledges its fiction and its basis on “pretense” meshed well with Kneubuhl’s desire to compound reality and unreality on the stage. He recognizes the stage as “an illusionary area” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Kneubuhl believed that the stage should also perform: “when I started putting my kind of theatre together, where I insisted that the stage as well, acts. And that process of putting a play together, is what the play is about, as much as it is anything else” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl says of Wilder that “what he was particularly interested in was just freeing you. He hated proscenium stages. He kept making you think in other kinds of stage picture. It was just to free you creatively so that you didn’t follow silly old rules”
(Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl claimed that by the time of writing the *Garden* trilogy that he had:

begun to like the four act forms...the nice thing is that the denouement can go on for about twenty-five pages. You keep it in the theatre and you say the point of the play, you came here tonight and I’ve riled you all up and I’m going to put it together with you. And when you go out of the theatre, you’re gonna leave this silly play in the theatre. It’s over, you don’t take it home with you (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). He also likened theatre-making to prayer, saying that “the point of a prayer is to rise all your anxieties up and then calm them down. Otherwise a prayer doesn’t work. And to that extent I think a play should do it, the Greeks did” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

Kneubuhl’s conscious use of the theatre to teach or deliver a message is derived from a variety of influences, including that of other playwrights. While Wilder had a profound and direct effect on his writing, Kneubuhl also attributed some of his theatrical influence to Strindberg and Brecht. He admired the illusion involved in Strindberg’s theatre:

In those days in the late thirties, early forties, the problem in theatre was how once more to mesh what looked as if it were becoming an increasingly unresolvable split in the approach to theatre. That is the theatre of Strindberg, the inner theatre which depended completely on illusion; this is a slice of the real world, you’re sitting on the stage and it involves the audience; and the expressionist outer theatre which sort of talks at the audience and says, ‘Hey audience, you stay away, you keep your seats, we’re here and you’re there’ (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).
Like Brecht’s theatre, Kneubuhl’s plays demand that the audience perform a double act, in that they think about and react to the action taking place on the stage. He spoke about first hearing a lecture on Brecht and the issue of conveying reality in the theatre:

a very great scholar of the theatre gave a couple of lectures on...how this pimply young man had faced and was solving the problem remarkably, and that was Brecht – do you want to talk directly to the audience, or do you want to make believe this is a reality and let the audience in? (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

However, in his later works Kneubuhl combined the various theatre genres of which he had become knowledgeable. He discusses this amalgamation as part of his heritage saying “That’s what I do and that’s part of my heritage, Samoan heritage, with Fale Aitu and the things I was telling about. And an early crush on Pirandello’s Six Characters” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). “I read Six Characters and go stark raving out of my mind. I’m terribly jealous that I wasn’t known as somebody named Pirandello” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl’s admiration for Pirandello is borne out dramatically in A Play: A Play where, just as in Six Characters in Search of an Author, fictional characters question the nature of their fixed identities.

Moreover, Kneubuhl likens the work of Pirandello to that of renowned Fale Aitu performer, Petelo. Petelo, he says:

is almost Pirandello ...he’ll do things where because you know there are no props, no sets, this is a bare acting area, so you know that everything is a lie, a theatrical lie, your imagination, whatever. Then something will happen to break that and infuse reality into the unreality of the theatre, of stage, destroying the whole illusion of theatre. When that reality intrudes, he then tops it by reverting back to the unreality, to defeat the reality (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).
Pirandello also believed in the big “if-ness” of the stage and shared Kneubuhl’s belief that “stage is illusionary, stage is a big as ifness and that’s what makes it a poem, you know, a poem is a big as ifness and a big metaphor, and a stage is a big as ifness, things are not as they seem” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This key view of the theatre as illusion and metaphor is intrinsic to an understanding of Kneubuhl’s theatre.

The link that Kneubuhl made in his playwriting theory and practice between Pirandello and Petelo, and Fale Aitu and Modernist meta-theatre is important. In making these connections, Kneubuhl acknowledges the intentionally hybrid nature of his work and his alienation – an underlying theme of all of his plays.

I could do Polynesian things of a kind, I could be modern by writing about the plight of the Hawaiians and be part of a theme, as an alien person, writing about Hawaiian alienation. So that has always been both my illness and my out, you know, I don’t really belong because I’m alienated, and that’s what I write about (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

These “Polynesian things”, the teachings and teachers that Kneubuhl had during his time at Yale and the alienation that was his “illness” and his “out” are the threads that have been woven together thus far. All would find their way into my production of Mele Kanikau.

**Theatre-making in Oceania**

The threads of the kie become finer as I add into the weaving the context of the theatre-making in Oceania. While Performance Studies analyses might take into account some of the first contact encounters between Western explorers and the indigenous peoples, these are not the concern of this thesis. Rather, this literature review intends to weave the
context of some of the formal, scripted, theatre-making traditions of Oceania, where Kneubuhl’s works are situated.

Kneubuhl claimed that “Samoans are the only Polynesian people I know of who had native formal theatre” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991), however his belief was incorrect. Mitchell’s collection of articles; *Clowning as Critical Practice: Performance Humour in the South Pacific*, certainly posits that formal theatre, in the form and ritual of clowning pre-date colonial impact. The clown (or fool) is described as a much revered figure across the research collection. Like the *Fale Aitu* clown, clowns in Pacific cultures are exempt from the usual rules governing social conduct. Editor William Mitchell describes the clown as one who is “passionately opinionated about the human condition and, via parody and burlesque, breaks the frames of proper behaviour to instruct, criticize, and transform. Whether the clowning performance is a critique of others’ actions, appearances, and beliefs, or is initiated to effect a cultural transformation, the clown is a political force who commands recognition” (1992, p.viii). Like pre-colonial performances examined by Looser (2011), clowning in the Pacific pre-dates records of Western contact. Hereniko describes the impact of colonisation on the Pacific clown:

The socioeconomic impact of colonialism abetted by hegemonic humor, and political force, has conspired toward the diminution or disappearance of the practice of ritual clowning in many parts of the world. While this is also true for Oceania, traditional ritual clowning, although threatened by change, remains a comic force in the lives of many. (Hereniko, 1992, p. 20-21)

The social licence of the clown – described by Shore in 1977 as “privileged expression” - to comment on his or her society is agreed upon by all of the contributors to Mitchell’s
collection. The clown’s job is to deconstruct order, just as Noa does in Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau*.


As arguably the foremost scholar in Oceanic Theatre, Looser’s 2015 landmark text *Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania* is “one of the first cross-cultural comparative studies of recent drama and theatre in Oceania” (p.3). Looser argues for the importance of Kneubuhl’s work as a playwright in Hawai‘i and his desire to “serve the community more directly and to tell stories of the different ethnic groups that made up island society as well as tales from the broader Pacific” (p. 49). She notes Kneubuhl’s meta-theatrical fusions of the Western and the Oceanic, and describes what he saw as “his responsibility as a Polynesian artist to draw from that rich cultural resource” (p.165).

There are many references to Kneubuhl’s work in texts about both Pacific Literature and Pacific Theatre. Mealey, in 1942 at Yale University produced *Saint Mac* as
part of her Masters degree. Kneubuhl is referenced in the research of Pearson (2005, 2014), Heim (2012), Looser (2015), Balme (2007) and Balme & Castersen (2001), mostly with close reference to Think of a Garden. Sinavaiana-Gabbard writes a brief but comprehensive Kneubuhl biography and an analysis of his published plays in her article ‘John Kneubuhl’s “Polynesian” Theatre at the Crossroads: At Play in the Fields of Cultural Identity’ (2000). Joanne Tompkins examines Think of a Garden in her chapter in Modern Drama (1997). In 1994, a PhD from the University of Utah submitted by Michael Vought, a former student of Professor Jackie Pualani Johnson, closely examines Kneubuhl’s (then unpublished) 1997 trilogy and draws from many of the archival resources that I draw from here. However, this is the first doctoral thesis that critically and creatively examines Kneubuhl’s work through the act of staging Mele Kanikau, and defining the vā in which his work makes its uniquely important contribution to Pasifika theatre-making in both Aotearoa New Zealand and wider Oceania.

AOTEAROA-BASED PASIFIKA THEATRE

There is a growing body of critical literature concerned with Pasifika theatre in Aotearoa. In 2002, Anton Carter wrote a chapter in Mallon and Pereira’s text pacific art niu sila entitled ‘Taking Centre Stage: Pacific Theatre in New Zealand’ in which he describes how “the emergence of Pacific peoples in New Zealand theatre has changed the lives of those involved, by creating new artistic opportunities and career possibilities” (Carter, 2002, p.147). In this chapter he traces some of the early Pacific theatre productions including Kneubuhl’s Think of a Garden (1993, 1995), Simei-Barton’s Romeo and Juliet (1992), Kightley’s Tatau: Rites of Passage (1996) and A Frigate Bird Sings (1996), Urale’s Frangipani Perfume (1997), Rodger’s Sons (1995) and Fraser’s Bare (1998) and No. 2
These productions, Carter argues, “challenge perceptions at each step, reaching out from behind cultural parameters and putting on a very visible and vocal ‘brown’ face” (Carter, 2002, p.147). Kata Fülöp’s PhD Thesis - *Reverse chameleon in the Kiwi jungle: Identity construction of Pasifika theatre makers* - provides the first comprehensive history of Aotearoa-based Pasifika theatre (2012). In this research she constructs a history of Pasifika theatre based on interviews with some of the prominent theatre-makers of Aotearoa including Oscar Kightley, Albert Wendt, Nathaniel Lees, Ole Maiava, Erolia Ifopo, Tanya Muagututia, Leilani Unasa, Vela Manusaute, Nina Nawalowalo, Tusiata Avia, Victoria Schmidt, Jenni Heka, Stacey Leilua, Salesi Leota, Pos Mavaega and Jonathan Riley (Fülöp, 2012, p.248-250). Both Carter and Fülöp acknowledge the importance of Kneubuhl’s *Think of a Garden* as “it was one of the first Pasifika plays performed in a professional theatre venue, because it showed the possibilities of theatre in terms of creativity, success, community building for Pasifika communities and artists” (Fülöp, 2012, p.81). Carter cites Nathaniel Lees claim that Kneubuhl’s play was one of his high-points and “something he’d been waiting for, for years” (Carter, 2002, p.149). He quotes Lees as saying of *Think of a Garden*: “Even just sitting down and reading the play, it affected us. It was such a joy to read about ourselves and our language, that we knew it would reach whoever came to see it” (Lees, in Carter, 2002, p.149). Balme and Castersen are also concerned with Pasifika theatre in Aotearoa. In their article ‘Home Fires: Creating a Pacific Theatre in the diaspora’ (2001), they herald John Kneubuhl as the “spiritual father of Pacific theatre” (Balme and Castersen, 2002, p.38) and argue that *Think of a Garden* is one of the plays through which a “Pacific consciousness is being manifested in the medium of theatre” (Balme and Castersen, 2002, p.45).

Marsh, writing the chapter entitled ‘Literature’, for Rapaport’s book *The Pacific Islands*, “examines the terrain of Pacific literature published in English by its indigenous peoples” (Marsh, 2013, p.225). Of particular importance to Aotearoa is the Talanoa: Contemporary Pacific Literature series published by the University of Hawai‘i Press, which “printed key canonical texts by Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare, Alan Duff, Witi Ihimaera, Epeli Hau‘ofa, John Kneubuhl and Victoria Kneubuhl which has made them available to contemporary audiences and accessible to the North American market” (2013, p. 227). This issue of access is an integral one. Like Kneubuhl, many Pasifika theatre makers view production as publication, however this is fraught with problems of future access. How will the works be preserved? How will future theatre-makers access the richness of work that has gone before them? How will we collectively reflect and remember?

As a Pasifika person, I know the importance of being able to produce an oral history, or genealogy; and as the creative director of a theatre company, I know that we carry with us our own oral histories. However, maintaining archives that can be resourced by others is becoming more and more important as the history grows. While Kneubuhl argued that production and performance are the equivalent of publication, it is also
important to document these journeys for others, so that we might, as Hereniko (earlier quoted) describes, leave “a map that they can use, modify, or discard as they choose” (Hereniko, 1995, p.11). This is part of the work of this thesis. Ann Andrews, New Zealand television and theatre executive, worked as the producer on *Think of a Garden* in 1993. In correspondence with Professor Jackie Pualani Johnson at the University of Hilo, she wrote of Samoans in New Zealand that:

they want to know as much about John and his work as possible. Young Samoans living in New Zealand are proud of their culture and history; many of them, born in New Zealand, are only just learning of the dictatorial colonialism imposed on Western Samoa by the New Zealand administration, so John’s story of Tamasese is important for them. (Andrews, personal correspondence, 18th June 1992)

This opinion is shared by theatre-makers and scholars alike. *Think of a Garden* is heralded by Associate Professor O’Donnell as a milestone. Like Lees, O’Donnell argues that “Kneubuhl’s work was a kind of impetus to Aotearoa-based Pasifika theatre makers to create work that wove together the best of both the Eurocentric drama canon and their Pasifika homelands” (personal correspondence, 27th April, 2016). The immense esteem that Kneubuhl is held in, creatively and critically, is the impetus for this thesis and its creative component. While *Think of a Garden* is a unique, important and well-documented part of the history of Aotearoa and the Pacific on stage, my production of *Mele Kanikau* has enabled an original contribution to the field of English and Drama Studies. The work of staging this play in this place at this time has been crucial to a deeper understanding of Pasifika theatre. Wendt claims, as referenced on page 17, that “without a doubt John Kneubuhl was one of the great pioneers of Samoan and Pacific drama” and that “he was the first to fuse these traditions and create what we can call the first
Samoan/Pacific modern theatre” (personal communication, 3 July, 2010). My production of *Mele Kanikau* constituted a world first for Pasifika theatre and was the only way that this fusion of traditions could be examined. Professor Michael Neill acknowledges the unique contribution of the production as follows:

[Michelle] has demonstrated a passionate commitment to the development of Pasifika theatre: those who were lucky enough to see her version of *Mele Kanikau*, by the American-Samoan playwright, John Kneubuhl -- staged at the University of Auckland Fale Pasifika in 2013 as part of her doctoral work – will remember it as one the highlights of Auckland theatre in the last decade: filled with wonderful live music and beautifully choreographed dance, it was unlike anything I had ever seen in student theatre, here or overseas” (Personal correspondence, 3rd July 2015).

The staging of *Mele Kanikau* has been a critical and creative act of scholarship. The production of a supposedly “unproducible” play has allowed access to Kneubuhl’s work to a new generation of theatre-makers, it has allowed a deepening of the understanding of Kneubuhl’s great significance to Pasifika theatre and it has allowed the critical examination of “Samoan/Pacific modern theatre”. This thesis, and importantly, its creative component, is necessary - to document, to archive and to make accessible the work of a master playwright whose swansong marks the beginning of an era for Pasifika theatre-makers in Aotearoa New Zealand.
Noa (Leroy Lakamu) is violently possessed by the mo’o as his halau watches in horror.

Chapter Two

“The World’s greatest Swiss/Welsh/Samoan playwright”: Citizen of Polynesia
This chapter continues the weaving of the *kie*. My intention here is to gather the strands of Kneubuhl’s musings about his identity as a Polynesian theatre-maker and the various influences on his developing philosophies about his work to respond to the first of the key research questions: How does the dramatic manifestation of Kneubuhl’s *afakasi* heritage in *Mele Kanikau* form both subject of and vehicle for his existential meditations on personal and cultural loss? This chapter does not intend to provide a critical argument about whether or not Kneubuhl was right or wrong in his views on theatre, but rather to more deeply examine how these thoughts contributed to his theatre-making, why they are important and how they are manifested in his plays. I was privileged to have access to the archival material and ephemera drawn on to write this chapter and the thesis as a whole. The primary sources for this chapter in particular are two interviews with Kneubuhl – the first with close friend John Enright in Tutuila in 1989, and the second with Jackie Pualani Johnson in Hilo in 1991. Both Johnson and Enright are an integral part of this *kie* and I am indebted to them both for their contributions to its weaving.

In this chapter, I offer an overview of some of the major events of Kneubuhl’s life and describe how they contributed to his developing theatre aesthetics. Throughout the chapter, I will apply my understanding of these aesthetics to *Mele Kanikau* and Kneubuhl’s other plays. My aim is to demonstrate how his *afakasi* heritage affected his dramatic writing and provided a vehicle for his developing understanding of representation, authenticity, and artistic creation.

The self-proclaimed “World’s Greatest Swiss/Welsh/Samoan Playwright” was caught between the two cultures to which he sought to belong. This borderline identity was a driving factor in his art throughout his life, and it is evident that he saw his biculturalism as simultaneously enriching and problematic:
Truly bicultural people – and I am a truly bicultural person – are very often envied. People think they know completely the other culture and vice versa. That may be true intellectually, but it isn’t true emotionally. There are things in the *haole* culture that the Samoan culture can never satisfy and there are things about Samoan culture that *haole* culture can never answer. In the one you feel alienated. That little side of you always feels alienated and on the other side, the native side, that *haole* side is not only alienating but a little threatening. Authority figures. I had to go into daily psychoanalysis for five years to get rid of my terrible fear of anybody who sat behind a desk. Anybody (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

From an early age, Kneubuhl was cognizant of the schism between the cultures of his mother and father. When asked as a child “who do you love best, your mother or your father?” Kneubuhl claims that “tears just streamed down my face. I’d never been asked that before and of course I’m going to say I love my mother better because she’s Samoan. I remember I ran out of the hut sobbing. And I think I’m still running, still sobbing ... And it’s one of the kinds of things I write about – alienation – how do we get to belong again?” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl saw that his plural identities would often be in conflict with one another and that perhaps he would never entirely fit into either culture:

what you are asking the poor child to do is to choose between two cultures, two parents, each one representing a different culture, and you’re asking the child to choose between father and mother, being palagi, being Samoan, and it was a devastating thing to do (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).
Simultaneously blessed and cursed with his biculturalism, Kneubuhl’s sense of alienation was acute. He describes his childhood experience of standing on the dock with his mother, waving at the ship that was taking his two older brothers away to Honolulu to school:

you know how you stand on a dock and a ship pulls away, for the first big sensation is that the dock is moving, the ship remains the same, or stationary but the dock goes away. That sensation is one of the key sensations of the emotional architecture that is me. It took five years of daily analysis...we finally got to the bottom, for the memory was so painful, but...suddenly it was revealed to me that these deep depressions and feelings of alienation and being rejected that I had, even though I was being very successful, had always been successful with things all my life...the doctor traced it back to that afternoon, that it wasn’t Jim and Ben who were going away, I was being sent away from home at three and a half and the sensation was very real..it was a profound insight into myself. I’m always the one who is going away and I’m always the one who is trying to get back home (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

This idea of always being both the “one who is going away” and the “one who is trying to get back home” emerges in his plays. Indeed, at the conclusion of *Mele Kanikau* we observe Carl attempting to do both. He is the “one who is going away” from the Waikiki hula pageant, away from his career and his social standing as an *aliʻi* and a successful businessman in modern Hawaiian society. Also, he is the “one who is trying to get back home” to being a “real” Hawaiian, aware of the cultural loss suffered by his people, and aware that he must strive to find out what this loss is for himself to create an ‘authentic’ life. Each of Kneubuhl’s plays has such a character. In *Think of a Garden*, the half-caste
Samoan narrator looks back to his childhood self and still feels alienated from the world to which he should have belonged.

Kneubuhl’s critical awareness of his alienation is inherently linked to his *afakasi* status. When he described growing up *afakasi* and dividing his time between being a Samoan boy in the village and being a palagi at his father’s dinner table he said of himself and other half-castes in Pagopago that:

we had a funny kind of bicultural existence, it wasn’t palagi and then Samoan, it was half caste and Samoan. And a half caste culture is not quite palagi, and there weren’t enough palagis that we knew, to make a palagi culture, except for our fathers, and they didn’t really join in, they sort of removed themselves from the culture. They loved their children, but they didn’t participate in the culture at all (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

He also identifies his gender as a critical factor in his alienation, believing that if it had been his father who was Samoan, he would have felt a greater sense of belonging:

my role model, my father, was the stranger and it was my mother’s culture and I had to keep orienting with my mother all the time...I felt as if I didn’t belong to those people there who were my father’s people. And I was scared of them. I still feel funny around the *haoles* if the truth be known (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

This perceived inferiority of Polynesians in the Western gaze was exacerbated by Kneubuhl’s experiences at Yale, where he was “the oddity...the peculiar person, you know, the exotic, very exotic person” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). In addition, he describes an event in Maryland where he and Dotsy planned to be married:

as an example of just how outsider I was and how alien I was, how unique I was.

When in Baltimore I went to apply for a marriage license, to marry Dotsy there in
my cousin’s home. I was turned down on the grounds that they had anti-miscegenation laws and all Malayo-Polynesians could not marry white women. Dotsy was white and I was Malayo-Polynesian, so therefore, I was classed with black and other Asians, and we couldn’t marry (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl claimed that his experience of feeling inferior was largely due to the intrinsic power of the Western education system where:

you were having an inferiority complex built into you, that you’re different from those palagis and they’re authority figures and they do everything, and of course the moment you go away you revert the other way, you have a horrendous compensating superiority pattern of behaviour (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

This is one aspect of the educational inequality that he fought against through his campaign for bilingual education in American Samoa.

From early in his life, Kneubuhl’s sensitivity to his afakasi identity helped to forge the pan-Pacific, transnational tendencies in his life and art. Sinavaiana-Gabbard states that Kneubuhl “also published influential essays arguing for an indigenous Polynesian theatre that would synthesize indigenous issues, languages and traditional performance aesthetics with those of Western drama” (2000, p. 212)\(^{24}\). His rich and extensive knowledge of Samoa’s language, culture, and heritage does not confine him to a definition as an exclusively Samoan theatre-maker. He also claims to be a “Hawaiian playwright” and the title of this chapter is a testament to his transnational affiliations. Kneubuhl also believed in the shared ancestry of Polynesian people:

\(^{24}\) Kneubuhl’s notes on playwrighting and theatre are listed in the Kneubuhl bibliography on pages 218-223 of this thesis. These are held by Professor Jackie Pualani Johnson at the University of Hawai‘i (Hilo).
that area which is proto Polynesia, and the earliest Polynesians, to which they profoundly belong. There is no Samoan who isn’t as much Tongan as he is Samoan. And if he knows those two languages, he can see where everything else in the culture, where everything else in Polynesia, ultimately derives from. And it gives him a profound insight, and makes him a citizen of the Polynesian world (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

This idea of being a “citizen of the Polynesian” world is an enduring statement of Kneubuhl’s beliefs and Polynesian advocacy.

“Polynesians of mixed blood and second thoughts”

Kneubuhl writes from the wider social and cultural landscape of Polynesia, but also specifically from locales within this region. The City is Haunted (1947) was written about post-war Japanese soldiers in Hawai’i who form the characters of the play. At the end of the play, they realize that they have become ghosts, returning to a home where they no longer belong. Think of a Garden (1992) was written about the Samoan independence movement and had particular relevance for Samoan-New Zealanders. A Play: A Play (1990) is written specifically for indigenous Hawaiians and set on the island of Hawai’i. While Kneubuhl is pan-Polynesian in his playwriting, his plays are written at particular times for particular audiences. However, his themes are consistent – as Sinavaiana-Gabbard says, Kneubuhl writes for and about “Polynesians of mixed blood and second thoughts” (2000) - the social and cultural landscape of the American Samoa where he was born and raised; the Honolulu where he was educated, lived and worked, and honed his

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25 Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000
craft; Hollywood, where he spent a substantial period of his life; and the American Samoa to which he returned.

Hawai‘i and Yale

The Kneubuhl family had a long relationship with Hawai‘i. John Kneubuhl left American Samoa to attend Punahou School in Honolulu when he reached the eighth grade at age thirteen. He explains that “Punahou was founded...primarily to educate the haole kids, the palagi kids, children of missionaries primarily and the grandchildren of missionaries, for whom the long trek back to New England, by boat and overland, was just too arduous and potentially dangerous” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). He lived with the Judd family during his years in Hawai‘i with whom his family had a close relationship. In the eighth grade, the young Kneubuhl also met Dotsy, who “directed [him] in the class play” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Theirs was to become a romance and marriage that would last for the rest of their lives.

Kneubuhl’s close familial connection to the Judds influenced his opinions on Hawaiian culture and his educational decisions, including the decision to attend Yale. In 1938, Kneubuhl applied to study music and submitted as part of his application what was likely to have been the first Samoan opera libretto. This was at once rejected by the convenor of the music course, Paul Hindeman. However, Hindeman noticed in the writing of this opera Kneubuhl’s talent for playwriting and instead submitted the playbook to the exclusive 47 workshop convened by Thornton Wilder.

Kneubuhl’s experience at Yale Drama School was at once very beneficial and extremely lonely. He describes Wilder’s demand that he produce a one-act play every day and Wilder’s insistence that he write “FREELY, FREELY, FREELY!” and simultaneously
with “DISCIPLINE, DISCIPLINE, DISCIPLINE” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1997, p.253). In this way, Kneubuhl honed what he described as a “natural ability” to write plays (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Kneubuhl also describes his time at Yale as very lonely, and identifies himself as the exotic other: “all kinds of things made me go through Yale feeling different, uniquely different, privileged different even...I was the exotic bird” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This reference to the “exotic bird” plays out in Mele Kanikau in the haunting images of “mamo, o’o, i’iwi” (p.115) that have been driven to extinction by the ali’i who hunted them to feather their cloaks. Kneubuhl comments on the oddity of being asked to say “something in Samoan” to entertain other students (Kneubuhl, in Enright, 1989). Both of his extant full-length Yale plays, The Sunset Crowd (1942) and Saint Mac (1941), are preserved in the Haas Arts Library Special Collections and both are comprised of indigenous Samoan material. In The Sunset Crowd, a group of Samoans congregate in the Sunset Bar in wartime American Samoa and dream of ways to escape their situation. The characters speculate that “maybe the world’s here in the Sunset Bar; and the Sunset Crowd all of humanity, dreaming vainly, always trying to go home to a yesterday where the soul is secure and without fears” (1942, p.77). By the end of the play, they reach the conclusion that “maybe after all, God and all the other important things in the world are dreams too. And this kind of dream isn’t running away. It’s a song, for your soul” (1942, p.94).

Kneubuhl’s belief that playwriting stems out of a fundamental loneliness is evident at this early stage in his playwriting career. Significant also, is the longing for home expressed by the characters in The Sunset Crowd. Despite the fact that they are indigenous Samoans, living in their homes in their country, the war has deeply unsettled them. One of the papalagi contractors expresses his own discontent saying, “so, at the
end of a perfect day, I go up to a native family and say: Terribly sorry, but you’ve got to clear out. We need your land to build guns and barracks on” (1942, p.1). Kneubuhl also claims that the ultimate Samoan story is the ghost story (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) and ghosts, or some variation of them, appear as characters in most of his plays. In *The Sunset Crowd*, “the ghost with the Golden Hair” advises, consoles and guides the other characters, who become ghost-like figures, or “brown automatons” (p. 45-46) by the play’s end, proclaiming “no-one ever goes home again; it never turns out to be the kind of place you expected” (p.76). These beliefs are consistent with Kneubuhl’s beliefs about alienation and existentialism. The other play he wrote at Yale, *Saint Mac*, is also set in Samoa although its Samoan content is put to more comedic use. The title character is Maka/Mac, a charismatic, charming fraudster whose styling of himself as “Mac” is perhaps indicative of his urge to affiliate himself with his *papalagi* counterparts - hopefuls who want him to turn “church miracles” into profit approach him. The *papalagi* characters Brand and Wing discuss the fact that Wing has fallen in love with a native girl. Brand cautions:

> use your brain! You’ve been in places like this before. You’ve seen these mixed marriages. They never work. The white man practically always degenerates down to his native wife’s level; he turns sour, grouchy...always got an axe to grind, not only with the whole world, but with himself (Kneubuhl, 1941, p.33).

In contrast, Mac proclaims, “God has come to me, my friend, saying I must help those of my people who have not been spoiled by the white world. He’s given up hope for white men” (1941, p.61). Some of the commentary in *Saint Mac* on the “natives” and their beliefs in mixed marriages is interesting, particularly in light of Kneubuhl’s parentage and his impending marriage to Dotsy in 1942. In all of Kneubuhl’s plays, the tension of his
biculturalism is evident, even from these first plays, written and produced a world away from his Polynesian home.

On his return to Hawai‘i in the early 1940s, Kneubuhl’s playwriting abilities were put to use in community theatre, “there I was in Honolulu without work and then the Honolulu Community Theatre came and asked if I would be an assistant director and also be their playwright. Nobody had ever written plays for the theatre in Hawai‘i before, full length plays” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). He made use of indigenous material and wrote *Harp in the Willows* “that was an enormous success” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989; Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). He became a director by 1948 (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). After *Harp*, Kneubuhl wrote his first “existentially far out” play called *The City is Haunted* which he said “was as crazy as *Harp in the Willows* was soap opera conventional” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). With this play, he says “[I] invented for myself before I even heard about it, a form of existential writing, for the stage” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl also began teaching playwriting in Honolulu and served as the director and resident playwright of Honolulu Community Theatre from 1946-49 (Kneubuhl, c.1987). He claims that: “One of the wonderful things, was we then started playwriting workshops, and all of a sudden, out of the woodwork, people started coming and then, at the university, Willard Wilson started his playwriting classes... between the two of us we turned Hawai‘i [Honolulu] into a play-writing conscious town” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Speaking in 1989, Kneubuhl was convinced of the vigour of Hawai‘i’s playwriting community at that time who “write indigenously, of indigenous material. Unfortunately, none of them really tried to think in native forms and things like that” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Dennis Carroll, who produced *The Harp in the Willows* in 1947 writes that: “A strong interest in indigenous theatre first manifested itself in Hawai‘i in 1946-48;
it was fostered by the Honolulu Community Theatre and its then Assistant Director John Kneubuhl... from December 1946, he wrote frequently of the need to create an indigenous local theatre and promulgated the slogan “Pacific plays for Pacific playwrights” (Carroll, 1976, p.58).

However, Kneubuhl’s relationship with Hawai‘i was problematic. He openly criticizes the alii class in traditional Hawaiian hierarchy, describing the chiefs as greedy and land hungry. He uses the word “‘āina” to explain this:

The word ‘āina, land, doesn’t mean ‘land’, it means ‘family’26. In the rest of Polynesia it means ‘family’. What happened in the land system...traditionally what a chief does in Polynesian cultures is he oversees land for the family and he sees that everybody in the family gets to use the land...but as the chiefs in Hawai‘i got more powerful and, more important, as the economic base of Hawai‘i broadened and seemed limitless in its potential...Eventually the common people became less important, less like family, and eventually the chiefs took all the land. It’s interesting that the word ‘āina, which means ‘family’ is removed from the meaning of the word and the word comes to mean ‘land’. So by a neat trick of removing the family from the land, as in fact they did, that’s kind of metaphorical for what happened to the people (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

This criticism of the alii is illustrated in A Play: A Play, where the character James Alama (unrelated to Mele Kanikau’s Carl Alama), a Hawaiian playwright, sells his ancestral family home. In this story, James is planning on making his new fortune through the play

26 Strictly speaking, Kneubuhl is only partly correct, while “kainga” is associated with family, in Tongan, in Māori, the translation is closer to “home” or “residence”. Definitions of kainga in Māori and Tongan can be found on page 32. “‘āiga” is defined as “elementary family” (Samoan: Milner, 1993, p. 11), and “‘āina” as “land, earth” (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 10).
he has written about Queen Liliuokalani, the last Hawaiian queen. Like Carl in *Mele Kanikau*, James is unaware of the deep cultural heritage that he has “sold out” to further his career. In *Mele Kanikau*, the *ali‘i* class, represented by the pageant king and queen, Carl and Lydia, are openly attacked for their ancestry and their failure to serve their people. Just as Noa condemns “the damned – the goddamned *ali‘i*,” Kneubuhl asserts that “it was the chiefs who said you don’t have a soul anyway and you don’t have a history, you are just an object that does work for me, the only one with a soul, history, identity” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Kneubuhl claims that the failure of the *ali‘i* to care for their people is unique amongst Polynesians and only found in Hawaiian history - “Hawai‘i is the only society that had an untouchable class in Polynesia...already I hate ancient Hawai‘i for that” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

Kneubuhl’s hatred stems from the failure of the *ali‘i* to care for the other indigenous citizens of Hawai‘i and from his belief in the arrogance of the *ali‘i* who told the “commoners in Hawai‘i...‘you don’t have a history because you don’t have a soul” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). He blames this belief for the pre-colonial population drop in Hawai‘i and the susceptibility of the indigenous Hawaiians to Western diseases and infections. He describes “the astonishing decimation of the Hawaiian people” and that “around 1400, 1500, 1600...we don’t know the figures but the trend is an almost frightening precipitous drop in population” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl argues that people who believed they had no soul simply lost the incentive to live. “If I were those people, I’d lay down and die and I think lacking tender, loving care...the Hawaiians laid down and died. Then when the *haoles* showed up with their diseases, it just tragically accelerated a process that was already in process” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).
Haole in Hawai‘i were not blameless however, and he says of Uncle Albert Judd who had been the head of Kamehameha school: “he was the one who pretty much set, entrenched or firmed Kamehameha’s commitment to vocational things as the only thing our young Hawaiian people were capable of doing...with all his heart and soul sincerity, insisting that Hawaiians could not ever learn intellectually to compete with haoles” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl did not agree with the Judds’ ideas about native education and indigenous peoples, and in Mele Kanikau he comments on the Kamehameha school system when Noa levels one of his verbal attacks on the pageant court at Kamehameha School for failing to admit his native Hawaiian son - “his one dream was to attend that school – a school set up for his people. You turned him down...because he didn’t know haole history, because he couldn’t write and read English well, because he didn’t even know who was the President of the United States” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.156).

These problematic views on Hawai‘i are manifested in Kneubuhl’s plays and in his teaching of playwriting where he believed that “young Pacific writers...have too much to draw on to waste their time on bootless anger, fruitless anger” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1997, p.266). Kneubuhl argues that “the expression of that open loneliness, of healing that hurt, the work of trying to heal it through one’s work, is being subverted by Hawai‘i and New Zealand, into anger” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). This anger is being transferred to Polynesian young people who simply copy that “tired, tired anti-missionary talk” and the “tired, tired clichés about imperialism stealing Hawai‘i from the Hawaiians”. Instead, Kneubuhl believed that “the slightest look at Hawaiian history in the past, the slightest look at what is happening to Samoa today, ninety percent of the damage that has been done to Polynesians was done by Polynesians themselves. And if we have lost our culture, we are to blame, not silly haoles or whatever” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). This is
apparent also in both *A Play: A Play* and *Mele Kanikau* where it is Hawaiian characters who are taken to task for their loss of culture. In *A Play*, it is James Alama who realizes the truth about what he has done to the goddess, Pele, who represents traditional Hawaiian values and beliefs. In *Mele Kanikau*, it is Carl Alama, the highest ranking descendant of the *ali‘i*, who realizes that his personal success has left him impoverished within his own culture: “I don’t turn my back anymore...I know my loss now” (1997, p.172). He recognizes that the significant loss of culture in Hawai‘i is the fault of his people. This stands in contrast to Kneubuhl’s early plays, which often speak to the injustices suffered by indigenous Hawaiians and recognize their critical cultural loss because of exploitation. In *Harp in the Willows*, the character Lyons, a young minister says, “it won’t always be robbing burial caves. They will find other precious and sacred things to steal from these people, steal, and sell. And one day, they will have stolen so much that even the Hawaiian will become a stranger in his own country...Every man lives by the images of his past magnificence, and when that magnificence is degraded, the man degrades himself a little too.” Likewise, the minister Kelii in *Hello, Hello, Hello* despairs: “I asked everyone, ‘where are the Hawaiians?’ And no one knew...I raised my voice to God and cried out...‘where are my people?’...and only the silence answered me, a silence that stretched from the Heavens from Eternity to Eternity” (Kneubuhl, 1973).

Each of Kneubuhl’s Hawaiian plays – *Harp in the Willows, The City is Haunted, Hello, Hello, Hello, A Play: A Play*, and *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* – reflect the “loneliness” that Kneubuhl refers to as a playwright, arguing that “we are lonely for our roots and this is our search” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). These plays are not only embedded in the social and cultural landscape of Hawai‘i but in Kneubuhl’s *afakasi*, existential playwriting aesthetics and personal psychodrama.
Fale Aitu and Mele Kanikau

In addition to Kneubuhl’s definition of Fale Aitu referenced in the literature review, he further describes Fale Aitu as a male artform where men played the female characters: “the [bi]sexuality of the Fale Aitu clown ... he has to achieve a certain kind of character which is both male and female and he can slide back and forth to either extreme the male or female side, or remain in the middle which is a neutral kind of [bi]sexual, sexless, clown mask kind of thing” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This is evident in Mele Kanikau in the character of Noa and at beginning of Act II where the Author describes “Tui Atua” who is both “a handsome young man” and “a beautiful girl,” depending on whom he met on moonlight nights. The Author says that “he/she is everywhere in the older Polynesian cultures. And even today some men contain him/her in them...men like Noa” (1997, p.138). Kneubuhl says of this “wandering ancestor” that Tui Atua possessed men and that “this possession is caused by ghosts. Therefore if you commit gang-rape, it’s just wonderful Rabelaisian and good fun, it’s not you. You are possessed by the ghost. And that’s dangerous” (Kneubuhl in Johnston, 1990). Again, Noa’s actions in Mele Kanikau – during his visit to the bathroom with the two boys and then his attempted rape of Charles – are evidence of his role as the bisexual Fale Aitu clown. Like the Fale Aitu troupe, Noa has done his research on the “village” he visits. He has learned about the pageant court and their roles in Hawaiian society. Carl accuses him “Tom was really impressed by one thing: how interested Noa was in everybody in the cast...That’s it, isn’t it? You checked us all out, and you made up this crazy story to make us seem guilty” (1997, p.158). Kneubuhl himself says, “in Kanikau...there is a bisexual hula dancer. Bisexuality has always been something that has been part of my fascination with the theatre...the Fale Aitu clown is
“bisexual” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), thereby tying his creation of Noa with his knowledge and experience of Fale Aitu. In A Play: A Play there is further evidence of the influence of Fale Aitu on Kneubuhl’s theatre-making. The character of the *mahu* who is able to change gender roles and in the course of the play, plays the goddess Pele, and is represented in both the form of the young Hawaiian girl and the hard Hawaiian man. In this play, Pele invades James Alama’s household and disrupts its inhabitants, comparable to Noa’s invasion of the Waikiki pageant. In each of these cases, the intrusion of the ‘clown’ is both destructive and restorative. Pele and Noa bring with them into the world of the play the wider concerns of Kneubuhl’s adopted Hawaiian society. In each case, they are granted license to criticize the key cultural stakeholders, and in each case, they inhabit the role of the bisexual clown. In each instance also, their role is central to the psychodrama of the play.

Kneubuhl acknowledged that while *Fale Aitu* still existed in the early 1990s, it is “not as bawdy but every bit as funny...but it’s just a show now. The socio-psycho therapy that went on, the psycho-drama, is not happening now” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991), and that today *Fale Aitu* are “simply something funny, they’re funny skits, but not too long ago, *Fale Aitu* were an expression...however unconsciously, [of] a whole view of a social corrective, and...what illness was” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Kneubuhl, in line with Aristotle’s view of catharsis in the theatre as curative, mourns the loss from Fale Aitu of “the fear and trembling that translates itself into laughter” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) that was a substantial part of the *Fale Aitu* he had experienced early in his life.

Kneubuhl’s use of the *Fale Aitu* form to criticise contemporary Hawaiian society is significant. In this, he uses an indigenous form of theatre not indigenous to Hawai‘i to
consider aspects of the post-colonial Polynesian position. Samoan scholar Sina Va’ai, Professor at the National University of Samoa, quoting Said argues that:

literature has played a crucial role in the re-establishment of a national cultural heritage, in the reinstatement of native idioms, in the re-imagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities. As such then, literature not only mobilized active resistance to incursions from the outside but also contributed massively as the shaper, creator, agent of illumination within the realm of the colonized (Said cited in Va’ai, 1999, p. 56).

By using aspects of Fale Aitu in his work, Kneubuhl capitalises on his afakasi heritage and implements a hybrid form of theatre in which this post-colonial performance can comment on itself in indigenous ways. The Author character educates the audience on how we should respond to the appearance of Tui Atua in the form of Noa Napo’oanaaakala. In his meshing of two distinct theatre forms, Kneubuhl re-imagines and refigures the local histories of Hawai’i and the Waikiki world. He causes the theatre audience to see the pageant performance in a non-touristical light, and also enables his Hawaiian characters to see the potential for active resistance and “reinstatement” in themselves. In Noa, Kneubuhl calls for the “reinstatement of native idioms” when he presents his ‘authentic’ ancient hula and legend. However, Kneubuhl also compounds this by utilizing his love of meta-theatre, simultaneously rendering this hula and legend as possibly the least ‘authentic’ moment in the play.

From Tutuila in 1989, he voiced his hope that “more and more young people here in Samoa will turn to playwriting in the next few years, and I have found that Fale Aitu approach to theatre, a very productive, emotionally, intellectually very rich kind of the theatre, and I hope young people will find it so for themselves. It’s magnificently
sophisticated theatre...honest theatre, because it regards theatre as theatre” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl writes that:

Samoans don’t separate the reality of life and the unreality of death, so that aitus have as much right to your space as you have to theirs, you know. And perhaps out of that kind of openness to day and night, life and death, you can get approaches to reality and unreality and start to treat them as coequal. I do that in my plays. I treat the real as unreal and the unreal as real, equally (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

This statement can be broken into several relevant parts and applied to *Mele Kanikau*.

The final part of Kneubuhl’s claim is that “you can...start to treat them as coequal...treat the real as unreal and the unreal as real, equally.” Possibly the most unreal part of *Mele Kanikau* is the story of the Author, who claims both to be and to not be the person of John Kneubuhl. He offers what seems to be heartfelt and sincere stories to the audience, only to pull the rug out from under their feet “I made [it] up” (p.136). He says that Frances is based on a ‘real’ person from his backstory called “Georgina,” but he muddles this story as well, admitting “none of it is true. Georgina didn’t do any of those things. I made those up for Frances” (p. 136). Of all of the characters in the play, the Author is certainly treated as simultaneously the most and least ‘real’. In my production, the Author was the most fluid of all the characters, walking in and out of each story unbeknownst to the other characters and interacting directly with the audience. At the beginning of Act II, he wove in and out of the hula dancers rehearsing, sometimes mimicking their dance moves, but they were oblivious to his presence, seeing right through him. He sung with the musicians and interrupted scenes to challenge the audience. In the first tender moment between Noa and Frances, the Author interrupted
loudly with “Why did she go off like that? I don’t know... And so, I wrote this play, in an
effort to find the answer to that question” (p.112), disrupting the mood of the scene and
calling the audience back to their role as a thinking audience, and to himself as the creator
of the play. Kneubuhl himself, asserting his understanding of Brecht, says:

I teach, and I can never tell an audience what they should know if they’re crying. So I will do a kind of theatre where I’m telling a story for the sake of teaching, and at a certain point I’ve got to cool everything off and say, this is an artifice, not I’m going to tell you the real thing, and then I’m going to write a little song, and the guy will sing the song down at the footlights (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

This is the effect that I aimed to produce in *Mele Kanikau*, and it was largely achieved
through the character of the Author, and through Kneubuhl’s “coequal” treatment of the
real and the unreal. This link between Brecht and the conventions of *Fale Aitu* was made
by Kneubuhl: “one of the reasons there are so many interruptive devices, Brechtian
interruptive devices in *Fale Aitu* is because they keep reminding the damn ghosts, hey
look, this is not real, it’s only a play so you don’t really want to invade it you know, it’s only make believe so stay away” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This affinity with a belief in ghosts in Polynesian society is present in other Kneubuhl plays including the entire *Think of a Garden* trilogy, as well as the Honolulu-based play *The City is Haunted*. In each of these, ghosts and living people interact equally, and in each are Brechtian/*Fale Aitu* devices that serve to remind the audience that these are ghosts on the stage, and this whole situation is make-believe. This weaving of the real and the unreal, and of Brechtian theatre and *Fale Aitu* are integral to a wider understanding of Kneubuhl’s theatre making.

The first part of Kneubuhl’s statement that “Samoans don’t separate the reality of life and the unreality of death” is also evident in the interactions of the living and the dead
in *Mele Kanikau*. Ghosts are “quintessentially Polynesian” according to Kneubuhl. He says that ghost stories are Samoan, but also Polynesian. He describes Samoans, making the tie between “ghosts” and the “aitu” of Fale Aitu saying Samoa is “a ghost-dominated society and a ghost dominated people. Ghosts were everywhere, everybody believed in aitu, everybody saw aitu, it was a controlling device really, you raised kids to behave, ‘cause...the aitus will come and eat you if you don’t’” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), but that also this all-pervading belief in ghosts and the power of the aitu was something that was particularly Polynesian in nature: “‘what is the one thing that is quintessentially Samoan, quintessentially Polynesian?’ I would say, ‘ghosts, write a ghost story’. A ghost story is the Polynesian story, is the Samoan story, and write a real Samoan ghost story, because we were all raised believing in ghosts” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This is borne out in many of his plays. Ghosts or “aitu” feature in key roles in *The Sunset Crowd* (1942), *The City is Haunted* (1947), *Mele Kanikau* (1975), *A Play: A Play* (1991) and *Think of a Garden* (1992). This sense of an easy acceptance of ghosts may be credited to Kneubuhl’s beliefs about Polynesians and the spirit world. Where a modern Western play might be met with scepticism if it included ghosts in key character roles (or as a plot device), it is somehow easy to accept Kneubuhl’s ghosts. They are a part of his cultural world and a significant inclusion in the worlds built in his plays.

Noa and Frances and their hula halau are identified by Keaka Ching in Act III as having “been killed in an accident” (p.168), however, these characters have emerged from the “murmuring darkness” to have their last conversation with Carl – to seek both revenge and reconciliation and to offer him one final message of *aloha*. In writing these characters, Kneubuhl uses his ‘Samoan-ness’ – the side of him that believed that the Polynesian story is a “ghost story” – in the writing of *Mele Kanikau* to create ghosts that
interact with the living. In my production, it was a challenge to present the living and the dead on stage together without revealing the ending. I wanted to capture this idea of Kneubuhl’s that is echoed by Wendt’s claim about Polynesians that “our dead are woven into our souls.” On my stage, the living and the dead were not separated, but merged together, blurring the lines of reality, just as Kneubuhl desired. Kneubuhl goes on in this statement to say, “aitus have as much right to your space as you have to theirs”. The spirits/ghosts/aitu of Noa and the halau claim the space of the Waikiki hula pageant (and arguably the wider space of Hawai‘i) leaving it “cold...” in their absence at the play’s end. In my production, I allocated a “pageant end” of the traverse stage, which held the throne dais and was coloured in gaudy reds and yellows. Opposite this was the “ghost end,” which will be further explained in the following chapter. The “ghost end” opened directly onto the outside of the Fale and was the point of entry for the audience. Essentially, the “ghost end” was not only the exit for the stage and its actors, but also the audience. Anyone leaving the production stage via that exit found themselves in the open air of the night outside. I represented the phrase “murmuring darkness” with this exitway. Lit in soft blues and grey, this doorway was meant to seem less solid, more uncertain, and when Carl exits this way at the play’s end, he follows the ghosts into the murmuring darkness and we are left to wonder where he is going. Carl declares upon his exit that he is “going to listen every moment of every day of [his] life” to the dead who are “all around us” (p. 172). We assume from Carl’s rejection of the “make-believe world of ali‘i and crown and thrones” (p.172) that he is leaving in order to live his life with more cultural integrity than he has done in the pageant world. However, as he leaves into the murmuring dark, the audience does not know where he is going and there are echoes of Noa’s own banishment. Carl too, has become the exiled outsider who no longer belongs.
Throughout the play, Noa asserts his “right to...space” by commanding the direction of the pageant, firing the pageant dancers, and altering the script to suit his purposes. In all of their interactions with the living Waikiki cast, the ghosts assert their right to shared space. At the play’s end, Carl acknowledges the wonder of this “awesome truth about ourselves” (p. 172), and he accepts the message delivered. He and Charles do not dismiss the message of the ghosts with fear and superstition, instead they embrace the message delivered. Charles proclaims that for the first time he “feel[s] like a Hawaiian” (p, 173). The presence of the ghosts has made these characters feel more, rather than less, ‘real’ because they have borne witness to them.

Kneubuhl claimed that “serious theatre is...all just one big shifting illusion” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), and that theatre should not exist solely for entertainment, but to teach. He agreed with Aristotle’s beliefs that “Aristotle...said ‘you suck them in just so far, then you push them back so far’, and the question is, where does sufficient pity bring them in, and where does sufficient fear push them out” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) and Kneubuhl too sought “that perfect balance between pity and fear [that] roots you in your seat, and if it’s a powerful play, you can be weeping in your seat, why don’t you run away from this horror, it’s because you pity the person too much to run away from them, the people on the stage” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). However, alongside this Aristotelian viewpoint is juxtaposed Kneubuhl’s Brechtian belief in “a kind of theatre where [he’s] telling a story for the sake of teaching and at a certain point [he’s] got to cool everything off and say this is an artifice” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This is clearly translated in Mele Kanikau where the audience is led to both pity and fear the characters of Noa and Carl while simultaneously recognizing that the world of the play is a constructed artifice.
In *Mele Kanikau*, Kneubuhl said that he used: “the *Fale Aitu* form throughout to attack the shallowness of contemporary civilization, the metaphor being contemporary Hawaiian civilization” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). This use of metaphor and representation is in keeping with the Modernist understanding that “theatre is always symbolic. It assumes that everything that happens on stage *stands for* something else” (Leach, 2004, p.2); and that “the ability of theatre not only to represent, reflect or abstract reality while standing apart from it, but also to *stand in* as a model of society” (Taxidou, 2007, p. 181). The “*standing in*” and “*standing for*” and the use of analogy in and through *Mele Kanikau* will be further examined in the critical readings of Chapter Four.

The shallowness described by Kneubuhl (above) is an act of bad faith in existential philosophy because the characters are inauthentic as Hawaiians, but also as people. While a first reading of the play seems to dispute Wendt’s claim that there can be no ‘return’ to a pure culture that existed pre-colonial contact, at a more critical level it is possible to see culture within the play as existing on more of a continuum. The play is made up of one *haole* and many Hawaiian characters who have varying amounts of cultural capital: from Noa and his disregard for social conventions combined with his rich, traditional knowledge and position as kumu hula; to Frances, as a *haole* more comfortable with the Hawaiian ‘*ōlelo* than the Hawaiians themselves; to Lydia, blood descendant of the traditional Hawaiian ruling class of ali‘i; to the Waikiki pageant girls who buy their floral costumes at “Nakaguchi’s authentic Hawaiian novelty shop” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p. 102).

It is the writing of the Author though, that bears the most resemblance to *Fale Aitu*. Through this character, Kneubuhl presents his belief in the stage as an illusionary area in which all is a “big as if-ness.” *Mele Kanikau* opens with the Author’s claim: “Ladies and
Gentlemen, I am the author of the play you are about to see” (p.99) and in this opening monologue the Author speaks both himself and the real playwright into existence. Kneubuhl’s synopsis of the play states:

an actor comes out and pretends he’s the author and says, ‘you know, without us he wouldn’t exist, so I have just as much right as he does to say I wrote this play because I also wrote the author’. With that one opening speech he pulls the author into this play and becomes the author…it’s a playwright saying “This is my play and the play is about Hawaiian Kumu Hula and his dance troupe...So you look at the play about when he was a small boy in Samoa and you see him before your very eyes what he has done to that memory to create a Hawaiian play. It’s Samoan autobiographical material and out of that autobiographical material he does a legendary, a legend based hula play (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

The question of autobiographical material will be addressed more fully in Chapter Four, but it is worth mentioning here that the figure of Georgina – lead character of the Author’s narratives – not only has parallels with Kneubuhl’s wife Dotsy, but also with his mother. The Author says, “Georgina had been educated in a private seminary for proper young ladies in New Zealand. She could paint water colors, play Chopin and Mendelssohn on the piano, and she pressed little flowers between the pages of a diary she kept” (1997, p.111). Of his mother, Kneubuhl says, “She was sent away to school in New Zealand when she was very young, a very talented singer, very talented pianist, very talented painter. She was artistically very talented. It was kind of funny because she came from a grass hut village way in the boondocks in those days” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). These similarities and parallels show that Kneubuhl wove his own life stories and characters into his fiction. While Think of a Garden is the most obviously autobiographical of Kneubuhl’s
plays, *Mele Kanikau* also has threads of Kneubuhl’s story woven through it. In Chapter Four, I will propose that as well as being represented in the characters of David and the Writer in *Think of a Garden*, Kneubuhl can also be seen as the Author, Noa, and Carl in *Mele Kanikau*.

**EXOTICISED AND COMMODIFIED: MELE KANIKAU AS SOCIAL CRITICISM**

Va’ai writes that “[Polynesia] became the exoticised and romantic terrain for Europe’s conquest, typified by the visual and textual images of the Pacific during the late 19th and early 20th century evok[ing] and reinforc[ing] an idea that Polynesia is a feminised and sexualised space” (Va’ai, 1999, p. 15) and that: “European literary re-imaginings of the Pacific continue, reconstructing paradises which are moulded to suit the tastes of their descendants in the post-colonial present” (Va’ai, 1999, p. 24). Historically, through Western eyes, the Pacific has been, and continues to be viewed or imagined in this way. As Lisa Taouma writes “many images of Pacific Islanders are still caught up in fantasies of an ancient untouched world full of semi-naked natives” (Taouma, 2004, p. 2). A Western audience, reading about a play that stages a Hawaiian hula pageant might easily call to mind Gauguin’s dusky maiden, hibiscus tucked behind her ear or scantily clad exoticised hula dancers swaying sensually to a lazy beat in the hot tropical sun. This is largely the image that Kneubuhl questions in *Mele Kanikau* and the ideology that I meant to challenge in my production of the same play.

The script of *Mele Kanikau* functions as social criticism of the declining state of Polynesian culture in the 1970s. *Mele Kanikau* serves as a charge to all Pasifika people to reconnect with their cultural past “in order to infuse a vacuous present with some sense of cultural lineage, meaning, and individual integrity” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000,
p.117). Through *Mele Kanikau*, Kneubuhl cautions Polynesians about the state of their diminishing cultural traditions, languages, and beliefs. He warns of how appropriation and commodification contribute to the loss of culture in a post-colonial society, but he also warns that perhaps the greatest danger threatening Polynesian people is their willingness to forget important traditions, and their disregard for their own integrity.

Chris Plant, writing in 1973, two years before *Mele Kanikau* was composed, condemns “the bastardised influence of the ogre ‘tourism’” and fears that traditional dance and song in the Pacific has degenerated into “Dances and ceremonies...enacted with little attention paid to artistic integrity, whether of content, gesture, occasion, or costume. Consequently, the ritual is very often superficial and insincere: culture and integrity are prostituted for the sake of a few dollars. Nothing is gained in the long-term; worse still, the soul of a people is lost” (Plant, 1973, p.58). While Kneubuhl describes the play as “a love song to Dotsy,” the cultural messages and warnings inherent in the play are plentiful. The plot and conflicts of *Mele Kanikau* are personal, but underlying the interactions between the characters and woven throughout the plot is the cultural loss of which Kneubuhl was so acutely aware. This is not only realized in his theatre-making, but in his wider social and cultural awareness. The appropriation and commodification of Hawaiian hula in *Mele Kanikau* is an outward representation of greater concerns for Hawaiian culture. The loss of the sacredness of the hula and command of the ʻōlelo suffered seemingly willingly by the characters in the play’s Waikiki pageant cast speak for wider cultural loss. The hula – the indigenous dance that is seen most ubiquitously to represent Hawaiian culture – conveys this loss. *Mele Kanikau* functions as a call to “listen, always listen, and remember” (p.175). Indigenous Polynesian beliefs, customs, and practices are seen as taonga to be protected and upheld with integrity in contemporary
times. This is evident at the play’s closing as the character of Carl makes his way off into the “murmuring darkness”, unsure of anything but his determination to “listen every moment of every day of the rest of [his] life” (p.172) thus articulating his commitment to attempt to live an “authentic” life.

**Kneubuhl the Existentialist**

Kneubuhl’s plays suggest his deep interest in existentialist ideas about the nature of authenticity. In fact, Sinavaiana-Gabbard writes that “his later work emerges from this period blossoming into existential meditations on the tenuous nature of human identity” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000, p. 212). Kneubuhl compounds the claim made by Wendt that “there is no state of cultural purity from which there is decline: usage determines authenticity” (Wendt, 1993, p. 12) within his plays. In *Mele Kanikau*, the haole character of Frances seems to be more “authentically Hawaiian” than Lydia, descended from Hawaiian ali‘i. Kneubuhl is equally concerned with existential authenticity however, and problematized this idea by presenting Noa, the character living the most “authentic” life, as the possibly the least “real” of them all – a ghost, leading other ghosts.

There is also the central concern of theatrical authenticity. In the theatre, where all actions are representations of other actions rather than a reality in and of themselves, what is the truly “authentic” act? Theatrical and cultural authenticity are the sets of kie strands woven here.

In *Mele Kanikau*, “we see formal play with the frequent slippages and tensions in cultural identity markers – Samoan, Hawaiian, ‘Polynesian,’ mixed-blood, local, tensions between material and spiritual worlds, lived and staged realities, themes of personal responsibility and freewill” (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000, p. 212) and this serves to
highlight the existential confusion that Carl must confront by the play’s end. The entire trilogy serves to aggravate this confusion in the minds of the audience. The plays demand that we consider our own beliefs about creation and creator. Kneubuhl insisted that, regardless of the order of composition of the plays, they were to be published only in the order he presented in the volume *Think of a Garden and other plays*. This is in keeping with Greek theatrical tradition that places the tragedies before the final comedy. In this way, the reader and audience are able to consider firstly the “itch” presented in *Think of a Garden*, where the writer begins to ‘exorcise’ his inner concerns through his writing. In *Mele Kanikau*, a fictitious writer presents a ‘real’ writer’s notes to an audience, and in *A Play: A Play*, the nature of God as creator is questioned. This order follows the trajectory the Kneubuhl insisted would highlight the development of his craft. It also facilitates a brief understanding of Kneubuhl’s philosophy as a self-proclaimed anarchist and existentialist. By the time we reach *A Play: A Play*, Kneubuhl questions the existence of God in his use of meta-theatre, arguing that:

> If all is a becoming then the process of becoming, all creation is a process of becoming and the artist is an integral part of that world is perhaps our best interpreter...Existentialists think we are. That’s really what *A Play: A Play* is about. If a becoming in the process of creation to me seems as important, seeing the becoming of a work, a created work is as important as a prayer because it sets theological surges. In that sense of me, writing a play is a kind of sacred, religious act. In addition to alienation and whatever, I have become, the plays have become things that say, ‘Look, this is about the writing of a play’. and in that writing of a play we have our own search for which there really are no final answers, because answers have no finality, in that process of searching...
you are seeing a live playwright, a live poet, whatever, at work doing this living thing which I now present to you on this stage tonight (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

And in *Mele Kanikau* he questions the nature of existence, arguing, “without us, like in *Kanikau* the actor says, ‘without me, he doesn’t exist’ – the playwright. In *A Play: A Play*, that same dialectical relationship is carried forward. The implication for us is that without people, God wouldn’t be. There’s no way for Him to define Himself to Himself or to work Himself out” (Johnson, 1997, p.98). By the close of *A Play: A Play*, the characters themselves are wondering who created them. Unlike in *Mele Kanikau*, where an Author presents himself to the audience and helps us negotiate the fictional world, in *A Play: A Play*, the characters ask for their author but are not answered – his mysterious absence can be seen as a representation of Kneubuhl’s questions about the nature of God and existence. In this, Kneubuhl links his views on religion to his playwriting and to twentieth century philosophers:

> The big problem in twentieth century philosophy to put in theological terms, if there is a God and he’s not dead like some people like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche said. You know, is he a being and along come the existentialists and they say nothing is a being, it’s a becoming. Then it’s an ongoing thing all the time which I suddenly realized is what I unconsciously and inarticulately believed and that’s why I always fought publication. The moment you publish one of my plays it’s frozen, it’s there, it’s no longer a becoming. It’s fixed and dead and I don’t like that (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).
Contrarily, Sinavaiana-Gabbard argues for an understanding of Kneubuhl’s poetics by reading the plays chronologically in order of composition. This consideration places *Mele Kanikau* first, followed by *A Play: A Play* and ending with *Think of a Garden*. She argues that:

by considering the plays in the order they were written, it is much more possible to trace a trajectory of development in Kneubuhl’s poetics, as he worked through a number of aesthetic, thematic, and metaphysical questions in his writing over these culminating years of artistic fruition (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 2000, p.218-219).

In this reading order, which necessarily ends with a reading of *Think of a Garden* as the culmination of Kneubuhl’s lifetime of work in the theatre, different understandings emerge. The two Hawaiian plays precede the Samoan play, and the period between the first (*Mele Kanikau*) and last (*Think of a Garden*) play becomes more pronounced. In this reading, it is perhaps easier to see the periods of Kneubuhl’s personal journey. He begins in the pageant world of Waikiki, with a critical consideration of what it means to be Hawaiian. *Mele Kanikau* is set in Honolulu, a Polynesian city that played a significant role in his life and education, and a society to which he belonged, but also alienated him. This alienation is reflected in the themes and characters of the play. The pageant Hawaiians are alienated from their history and culture, and the “real” Hawaiians are ghosts who cannot belong either. In *A Play: A Play*, this is taken further when the characters realise that they are not ‘authentic’, they have no will or existence of their own, and that their creator either cannot or will not intervene to reassure them. In Kneubuhl’s final play – *Think of a Garden*, the reader receives personal insight into Kneubuhl’s own quest for authenticity, his rejection of bad faith, and his struggle with his own hybrid identity.
Regardless of the order in which the trilogy is read, there are obvious links between Kneubuhl’s plays and characters - their traits, values and ideologies and the links they have to loss, cultural history, and Kneubuhl’s own life experiences. Foremost in such an analysis stands the character of the “author/writer” who is the link between fact and fiction, the audience and the players. The author/narrator figure appears in each play and at various times claims both to be and to not be the person of John Kneubuhl. The complex layers of meta-fiction created by this narration will be unpacked further in Chapter Four.

The quest for freedom was important to Kneubuhl in terms of his developing playwriting philosophy and his successful writing career in Hollywood ran contrary to this principle. He describes the Hollywood years as “twenty [wasted] years” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). He did not recover from the psychotic breakdown he suffered in Hollywood until he had burnt the television scripts he wrote there:

I brought home all this stuff, and I immediately went into that room there and set it up as an office, and started working on it and became increasingly depressed, and I kept wondering whether I’d made a mistake coming home, and I didn’t know what it was that was depressing me, and suddenly I realized, I’d been back for six months and for six months I’d been carrying Hollywood on my back...so I went out here, and poured out twenty years of work...all on the grass and threw kerosene on top, and set them all on fire. Dotsy was out in the garden in the front, she saw when she came, I thought she was going to jump into the fire and grab the scripts out, but they all burnt up beautifully, made a wonderful fire and for the first time I was free (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).
Kneubuhl believed that “the most precious attribute in life that I can think of is freedom, it’s the only absolute I know” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) and he dedicated his “every energy, every thought to freedom and that’s the basic base for human dignity as far as I’m concerned. Any social system, any political system, that in any way compromises human freedom, is by definition my enemy” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

The value that Kneubuhl placed on freedom translated to his belief that the audiences of his plays should be free to react also. He felt constricted by the medium of television and wrote about the freedom of playwriting in contrast with the contrived responses invoked by film. In the medium of film or television, Kneubuhl argued that because of the narrow focus of the camera lens, the audience was being prompted to a single reaction or viewpoint. In contrast, he preferred the freedom of theatre, where the audience could look at whatever they chose and respond in a free manner (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), but he did strive to elicit a reaction from them, and his measure of the success of his plays was in this reaction:

If the play works, if it is successful, what I have elicited from you is your confession about your nature rather than a common agreement about anything. I have existentially succeeded in singling [out] each one of you and made you react...The play has trapped you into saying something about yourself by making that reaction to the play...I think plays are situational things. In the real deep human situation as you interact you widen consciousness and you never pin it down to anything (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991).

This concern with the immediacy of a live audience reaction is consistent with Kneubuhl’s reluctance to publish his plays “for some strange reason with me, I’ve always moralized
that, to the point where I've always refused to be published. And maybe it's also because I've always refused to be caught out, to reveal myself permanently, in whatever, and what my concerns are” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). His insistence on “plays as situational things” is reflected in his creation of these plays at particular times, for particular audiences, created in reaction to some aspect of the Polynesian world. My production of *Mele Kanikau* sought to honour these precepts. Created at a particular time for a particular audience, my Director’s Note in the programme claimed that:

> In our pan-Polynesian casting we acknowledge that Kneubuhl himself was writing from both inside and outside his adopted Hawaiian culture. This version of *Mele Kanikau* is a story for all Pasifika people and we hope that in some way it might serve as a wake-up call. In Aotearoa, our Pasifika cultures are in danger. For every child that is taught to speak English instead of Te Reo Māori, or Tuvaluan, or Samoan, or Tongan, or Niuean, or Reo Kuki Airani – there is loss. This *Mele Kanikau* is a lament for our indigenous Hawaiian brothers and sisters, but it is also a lament for what *we* lose, and stand to lose elsewhere in the Pacific, and here in Aotearoa. It is a mele for us all. (2013, *Mele Kanikau* programme, Appendix C).

My intention in the casting and the staging of *Mele Kanikau* was an important part of the weaving of the *kie*. The *kie* needed to be moulded for each member of the cast, crew and audience to wear comfortably in the *faiva*. In this way, I acknowledged the play as a “situational thing” and a reaction to the local, personal and communal aspects of our Polynesian world.

Contributing also to Kneubuhl’s existential philosophy was his experience of wartime malaise. During the war, the US army utilized Kneubuhl’s expertise with
language and he became a Japanese translator. However, as this was not a role that kept him actively engaged all of the time, Kneubuhl’s sense of waste was exacerbated: “the other thing that happened during the war, sitting alone, with wasted time and such, was the feeling of tremendous waste, of being used aimlessly, for no purpose ill or good, but just being wasted, and that had a profound effect on me” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). From this, he came to the conclusion: “when you want to be something, do something, it’s your most productive time in life, and just to sit there staring at a wall, doing nothing, that was terrible, and it had its pretty frightening after effects on me. So my war was really a kind of personal kind of a disintegration war” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Given that these are the feelings and mindset Kneubuhl carried with him into his Hollywood years, we can see that his eventual breakdown was attributable to an accumulation of events and experiences.

**But what of the missing years?**

In 1987, Kneubuhl writes:

> I’ve been picking away at a trio of three-act plays for the past 13 years. Two are finished (the first has already been done in Honolulu, the only place it can be done as it is very Hawaiian), the second will probably be done here in Hilo next summer (the only place it can be done as it is structured around ancient hula and Hilo is perhaps the last Gomorrah of that ancient art), and am half way through the third one. They are strange plays, of limited appeal, but all that fits my hand (Kneubuhl, [c.1987]).

The two plays that Kneubuhl refers to are *Hello, Hello, Hello* and *Mele Kanikau*. The third is *A Play: A Play*. Although *A Play: A Play* is generally believed to have been written circa
1990, there are references to a play called ‘A Piece of Wood’ in the Hawai‘i Observer, February 24, 1977. In a review of the trilogy, writer Catherine Bratt identifies Mele Kanikau as Kneubuhl’s “latest completed work” (p.27). With this in mind, it is likely that the play we know as A Play: A Play existed, at least in draft form as A Piece of Wood. This chronology places the three plays in close proximity – Hello, Hello, Hello in 1973, Mele Kanikau in 1975, and A Piece of Wood/A Play: A Play pre-1977. The composition and production dates of these plays are indicated in Table 1²⁷.

²⁷ The information in this table has been gathered from a number of sources. The primary source for information regarding each play is identified in the footnotes.
<table>
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<th>Play</th>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Produced</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Company/Director</th>
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<td><em>Saint Mac</em>&lt;sup&gt;28&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1941 (18&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Dec)</td>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>Yale Drama School/ Victoria Mealey</td>
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<td><em>The Sunset Crowd</em>&lt;sup&gt;29&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>1942 (14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;, 15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;, 16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; May)</td>
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<td><em>The Harp in the Willows</em>&lt;sup&gt;30&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Honolulu Community Theatre/Dennis Carroll</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1975 (HCT, 61&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Season, 1975-6)</td>
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<td><em>The City is Haunted</em>&lt;sup&gt;31&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>1947</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Honolulu Community Theatre/John Kneubuhl (co-director)</td>
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<td><em>Point Distress</em>&lt;sup&gt;32&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1950 (20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; June – 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; July)</td>
<td>Honolulu (Dillingham Hall, Punahou School)</td>
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<td><em>Hello, Hello, Hello</em>&lt;sup&gt;33&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>pre-1974</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Honolulu Community Theatre/John Kneubuhl</td>
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<td><em>Mele Kanikau</em>&lt;sup&gt;34&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>1998</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2013 (2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; – 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; May)</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
<td>University of Auckland/Michelle Johansson</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>A Play: A Play</em>&lt;sup&gt;35&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>pre-1977</td>
<td>1990 (5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;-7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;, 12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;-14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; April)</td>
<td>Hilo</td>
<td>University of Hawai’i at Hilo/John Kneubuhl</td>
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<td><em>Think of a Garden</em>&lt;sup&gt;36&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>1992 (23&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Feb)</td>
<td>Pagopago</td>
<td>Island Community Theatre; Le Si’uleo O Samoa/Patty Page</td>
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<td>1993&lt;sup&gt;37&lt;/sup&gt; (11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Feb – 11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; March)</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
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<td>1995&lt;sup&gt;38&lt;/sup&gt; (19&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Oct – mid-Nov)</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
<td>Taki Rua/Depot Theatre/Nathaniel Lees</td>
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<td>1995&lt;sup&gt;39&lt;/sup&gt; (19&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; May – 10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; June)</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Kumu Kahua Theatre/David C Farmer</td>
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*Table 1: John Kneubuhl - play chronology*

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<sup>28</sup> Mealey, 1942  
<sup>29</sup> Johnson, 1997, p.253  
<sup>30</sup> *Eden is the place we leave*, 2007  
<sup>31</sup> Johnson, 1997, p. 254  
<sup>32</sup> Lawson, 1950  
<sup>33</sup> Johnson, n.d.  
<sup>34</sup> Kam, 1998  
<sup>35</sup> UHH Theatre, 1990  
<sup>36</sup> Island Community Theatre, 1992  
<sup>37</sup> Nga Taonga Sound & Vision, 1993  
<sup>38</sup> Taki Rua Theatre, 1995  
<sup>39</sup> Kumu Kahua Theatre, 1995
There is a considerable gap then, between the composition of these plays and the composition of *Think of a Garden* completed in 1992. What is it, then, that was occupying his time and energies in that gap of fifteen years? Why was there such a gulf before the composition of the other play (or plays, if this speculative reading is incorrect) that now completes the trilogy? Kneubuhl claimed that he returned to the islands from his twenty wasted years in Hollywood in order to write plays – what happened that caused him to take such a detour from this intention?

I cannot be certain of the answers, but my research indicates that this is the point at which Kneubuhl began his campaign for indigenous education, about which he begins to write passionately at this time. He writes about “the wastefulness...there was in educational practices which denied a people their own identity which meant language, culture and history...I feel profoundly on the subject – which is to me a matter of life and death” (Kneubuhl quoted in *Eden is the Place We Leave*, 2007). This matter of life and death is one that he dedicated himself to in both Samoa (1975-1983) and Tonga (1972-73)\(^{40}\). In the years between *Mele Kanikau* and *A Play: A Play* he helped to establish the American Samoa Community College in 1970-72; directed the Tailulu Schools throughout the Tongan Islands from 1972-73; instructed at Leeward Community College in O'ahu between 1973-76; and designed and directed the bilingual/bicultural programme for the Department of Education in American Samoa between 1975 and 1983. After 1983, he retired from formal teaching but continued to contribute time and effort to Pacific Studies in American and Western Samoan schools and to bilingual/bicultural programmes in

\(^{40}\) Kneubuhl, c.1987
Hawai'i. He also lectured in schools and at government and private organizations on Polynesian histories, cultures, linguistics, and ecologies.

One of the key means of establishing and maintaining systems of “dominance and subservience” by colonizers is in the construction of education systems designed to put the colonizer in a superior position by enforcing the idea that the colonized subject is inherently inferior. In systems of education, colonized subjects are systematically made to feel inferior because of their ways of being and knowing. “Now when you say, you’re going to have to learn how to speak English, what they’re actually saying is, you’re inferior until you learn to speak English, and your language is inferior, so therefore, it isn’t worth teaching you these things. The racism, those biases, are hidden, but they’re there, and they operate very cruelly” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). While Kneubuhl advocated for a “decolonized sense of self” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) in his creative writing for the theatre, he also strongly fought for bilingual education to be established in American Samoa and argued for the institution of this in Hawai'i. This combined many of his passions including his belief that “there’s a whole rich, rich area of a culture that is reflected in its language use” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), and that young Polynesians “owe it as a moral duty to learn a dying Polynesian language. If in your schools you really care about your being Polynesian, then why are you learning French? You learn Hawaiian” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1989). He articulates his thoughts about the whole of Polynesia and they are not just confined to opinions on Samoa: “In Hawai'i, they’ve lost their language except for a valiant, moving effort to bring it back. In New Zealand, the same thing is happening except it’s even more lost in New Zealand. So you young people, I urge you that it is your moral duty as a Polynesian to learn one Polynesian language that is dying” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl’s views on bilingual education were
founded on his own experiences born of his *afakasi* status. He wanted students to be fluent in both the Polynesian and the Western world and he believed that it was the duty of the education system to teach this. In this way, Kneubuhl fought for biculturalism and bilingualism:

I would instantly introduce bilingual education, properly and thoroughly and the other half of bilingual of course, is bicultural, and I would teach kids to be, at the very least, fluently and sensitively as at home in Western civilization as they are in their own civilization. I would make them intensely aware of their Polynesian side, and I would make them free human beings (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Kneubuhl saw many flaws in the Samoan education system: “it blatantly seemed silly to me that you had a college in a place where 94% of the students entered elementary school not speaking a word of English, and that you were forced then to learn, in a language they could not understand, and in 1968-69, most of the teachers could barely speak English...you were condemning both teacher and student to prison of ignorance” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989), and he saw that this system, despite the supposed best intentions of the palagi people in positions of power, was set up to maintain “dominance and subservience” between the colonizer and the colonized. He claims, “that’s always been the trouble with Samoan education. When the palagi administrators, in all sincerity, and in all kindness I suppose, said ‘we will now educate Samoans’ they said, ‘you will educate them to be like me, the educated palagi,’ and the things that they value, were immediately thought to be the things that were good for Samoans. And you don’t educate people when you say, ‘you are going to be like me’. You educate people in the ways of education. You don’t educate people to be anything else” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). His campaign for
bilingual education in Samoa was eventually successful. He served as the director of the bilingual/bicultural programme for the Department of Education in American Samoa from 1976-1980, and then he designed and headed the Samoan Pacific Studies programme at American Samoa Community College from 1980-1983.

There is little doubt that Kneubuhl’s refusal to allow Samoan children to be inferior to their palagi counterparts through an inequitable education system was fuelled by his own experiences of being caught between two cultures. Kneubuhl rejected the dominant colonial culture and the way Western systems are imposed on Polynesian children. He fought for schools that allowed children to be educated bilingually and biculturally and he thought that this would best serve them to progress in an increasingly westernized Pacific. Wendt argues that:

> despite the fact that the dominant colonial culture denigrated our cultures and languages and tried to make us feel ashamed of them, our ways have survived in us and, by shaping who and what we are, have contributed enormously to the ways we make and practice art. For many of us, our rejection of colonialism, racism and sexism and our refusal to be colonized/pakehafied and reject our ways of being, believing, and dreaming is at the heart of the art that we do. Our art is our attempt to understand who and what we are, and the marvellous cultures, histories, and situations we have come out of. Our art is the search for that and to map and shape the present (Wendt, 2010).

Kneubuhl’s plays bear witness to this “attempt to understand who and what we are” as Polynesians. In his championing of bilingual/bicultural education, Kneubuhl fought for the social liberation of the Polynesian islands and strove to universally equip indigenous
Polynesian children for success in an increasingly globalised world, without sacrificing their cultural integrity as Polynesians.

**Pacific parallels: The New Zealand-Hawai‘i connection**

Producing *Mele Kanikau* in Aotearoa begs many questions – why stage what Kneubuhl himself believed to be an unstageable play? Moreover, why stage a play written specifically for Hawai‘i in 1975 in Auckland, 2013? What possible relevance could it have? These questions begin to be addressed here and are woven into the kie more substantially in the following chapter. I believe that my production of *Mele Kanikau*, while set in Hawai‘i in 1975 resonated strongly across the 38-year divide to Aotearoa in 2013. There are parallels between the indigenous peoples of Hawai‘i and Aotearoa in terms of their struggles for land, language, and education. These similarities are manifest in the indigenous Hawaiian movement and that which has taken place for Māori in Aotearoa. In both cases, the indigenous group has sought sovereignty and the right to be self-governed, although there are marked differences in the way in which this has been pursued.

In Hawai‘i and Aotearoa New Zealand, civil protest has occurred in different contexts. In both cases, each peoples has developed a relationship with the colonizing government that has attempted (at whatever level) to make amends for the wrongs visited on indigenous communities. This is very controversial, as the admission of culpability by governments is considered a significant step forward, and the ways in which this has been addressed by each respective government have been substantially different.

Both indigenous Hawaiians and Māori suffered from severe population decline at the hands of colonialism. In both cases, colonial powers attempted to either eradicate or assimilate the native peoples. Mason Durie argues that “in 1896 there were even doubts
about Māori physical survival; the population had declined to a mere 42,000, and during
the previous two decades it had been periodically predicted that the race would become
extinct...by 1874 they had become only fourteen percent [of the population], a minority
in their own country” (Durie, 1998, p. 53). In Hawai‘i , “Asian immigrants poured into
Hawai‘i to work haole-owned plantations, Native Hawaiians continued to decline in
number, and the Republicans enjoyed total control of the government, transportation,
educational, and economic systems” (Trask, 1991, p. 45). Both cultural groups suffered
greatly in the initial stages of colonisation.

In addition, the indigenous peoples of each nation suffered and continue to suffer
in terms of socio-political status. In both Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, indigenous people
increasingly occupy the lower classes of society and therefore become more and more
powerless to change: “Native Hawaiians perceive themselves, rather accurately, as the
least powerful group in island society, both politically and economically. Compared to
other island groups, Hawaiians are disproportionately represented on public assistance
rolls and in juvenile courts” (Linnekin, 1983, p. 244). Perhaps in this case the native
Hawaiians are at a considerably more substantial disadvantage, because Māori at least
act in an “advisory” capacity in most government departments. Durie recognises that
although this might have been initiated as a token gesture, at least there are Māori voices
present in the government of the country (Durie, 1998). The social statistics offered by
Davianna McGregor show that “Hawaiians in Hawai‘i today are alienated from the social
system and the political power structure that rules Hawaii. Hawaiians fall into the lowest
levels of Hawai‘i’s ethnically stratified political economy” (McGregor, 1989, p. 10). This
means that while native Hawaiians may desire self-governance, the social structure of
their society denies them the mobility to actively pursue it. They are disadvantaged because they are ruled by social stratifications that are not of their own making.

McGregor asserts that “without doubt, the survival and perpetuation of indigenous minority peoples and their cultures is integrally linked to the question of political sovereignty” (McGregor, 1989, p. 12). Indigenous Hawaiians remain under the governance of the United States of America, despite the claims that have been granted to the indigenous American Indians tribes to their own land and governments.

In Hawai‘i in 1993, 15,000 Hawaiians marched for sovereignty on the 100th anniversary of colonization by the United States. Kame‘Elehiwa writes that:

After 100 years of American rule, Hawaiians are a minority in the land of their ancestors. In 1896 Americans banned the native language and beat Hawaiian school children - parents and grandparents of the present generation - for speaking it. American schools denigrated Hawaiian culture, arts and history as primitive and savage. Hawaiians were made to feel ashamed of their faces, the colour of their skin, their names, and of their very identity (Kame‘Elehiwa, 1993, p. 64).

In Trask’s words, “there has not been any federal recognition of a claim to self-government”, and that federal policy in fact “straddled two poles, acknowledging Hawaiians as Natives for some purposes...but refusing to grant them the practice of Native self-determination” (1991, p. 55). In contrast, Tuhoe researcher, Hineani Melbourne, author of Māori Sovereignty: The Māori Perspective, interviewed important leaders who express their views that although Māori have the Treaty of Waitangi as a legally binding document that awards rangatiratanga to Māori, the Treaty itself has been the cause of misunderstanding and conflict between and among both Māori and Pakeha. Māori politician and activist Sandra Lee argues that “Ultimately our sovereignty as a
people in Aotearoa is not dependent on treaties, or pieces of paper, or legislation or political points of view, or party policies or the like. Our sovereignty is guaranteed. This is our home, we exist and our place as Māori – whose language and culture has evolved on these islands – is absolute” (Lee in Melbourne, p. 130).

For each indigenous people, attempts have been made to revitalise the native language. In the case of Māori, Durie discusses the creation of kohanga reo and kura kaupapa to encourage new generations to learn and maintain the mother tongue. Language maintenance is deemed necessary to the survival of culture, and Māori activists advocated for this for a long time and it has since become a government priority (1991, p. 74). In Hawai`i, there have also been grass roots, as well as governmentally sanctioned attempts at language maintenance, from schools where Hawaiian is the only medium of communication and instruction to government scholarships and initiatives supporting the Hawaiian language. Kame'Eleihiwa writes that “in 1985 the first Punana Leo (Hawaiian Language Immersion pre-schools) were opened; they have now grown into Kula Kaiapuni (Hawaiian immersion elementary and secondary schools) funded by the public school system” (Kame'Eleihiwa, 1993, p. 66). In both of these language movements, a commonality is the notion of whanau or ‘ohana41, a concept that is intrinsically tied to both cultures and languages.

A similar issue of contention between the indigenous peoples of both nations and their colonial governments has been land rights. “Some organisations focus on land as a means of perpetuating the culture and spiritual beliefs and practices of the Hawaiian people; others as a means to generate revenues for native Hawaiian programmes; still

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41 “Family, relative, kin group” (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, p. 276)
others as a means of political sovereignty; and some as a way to place the Hawaiian on the land and allow Hawaiian families to become economically self-sufficient” (McGregor, 1989, p. 23). In both Aotearoa and Hawai‘i, land ownership was fundamentally understood differently by the indigenous peoples and the colonisers. It is well know that the chiefs who signed the Treaty of Waitangi did not share an understanding of the rights to landownership with their Pakeha counterparts. In Hawai‘i, the displacement of the indigenous population happened rapidly and the relationship between indigenous people and the land or ‘aina was threatened. “Hawaiians’ historic and cultural claims to the land as the first and original claimants were increasingly seen, at least by Hawaiians, as primary” (Trask, 1991, p. 48). In Aotearoa, land disputes led to the historic land wars which saw huge and devastating casualties for the Māori population. In each case, the indigenous people perceived their occupation of the land in a different way to the settlers. To the colonisers, land was a commodity to be purchased and sold, without thought of whanau or ‘ohana or tribe or iwi. For the indigenous people, land was inherently linked to identity and culture. These land disagreements and displacement by the native peoples are discussed by Trask as the genesis of movements towards self-governance. “Out of anti-eviction and other land struggles in rural areas threatened with urbanization was born a Native rights movement, similar to movements of other colonized Native peoples, like the Tahitians and the Māori, in the Pacific” (Trask, 1991, p. 47).

The journeys of indigenous Hawaiians and Māori are very similar and many of the movements towards self-governance parallel each other, however there are significant differences that mean that each culture and heritage must be considered separately in the first instance. It is not the intention of this thesis to provide a detailed comparison of
Aotearoa and Hawai‘i, however these significant Pacific parallels are worth acknowledging in terms of staging *Mele Kanikau*.

This thesis began with statements about the importance of Kneubuhl’s work to Polynesian playwriting in Aotearoa, however Kneubuhl had sceptical attitudes towards New Zealand. He claims that before Yale, he wanted to undertake his higher education in England “oddly enough I wanted to go to Oxford. So I was English enough to want to go to Oxford but I didn’t want to go to New Zealand. That was in the boondocks. You’d turn into a baby sheep or something if you go there” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). It seems though, that despite his opinion of New Zealand and New Zealanders, our theatre and film directors have held him in high regard. It is perhaps partly due to the interest of Māori director Don Selwyn in producing *Think of a Garden* that this final play was included in the published trilogy - “when they read ‘Kanikau’ in New Zealand they were enormously impressed and they wanted to do it. The producer, the director, Don Selwyn...is Māori and is the top Māori director in New Zealand” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Immediately before his death, Kneubuhl was in discussions with Selwyn about producing the entire trilogy in Aotearoa.

Two of Kneubuhl’s trilogy plays have now been produced in Aotearoa – *Think of a Garden* in Auckland in 1992, and again in Wellington in 1993; and *Mele Kanikau* in Auckland, 2013. It is possible that Kneubuhl believed both of these productions were unlikely, if not impossible. Kneubuhl’s doubts about a successful New Zealand production of *Mele Kanikau* could in part be because 39 years ago he could not foresee the extent of change wrought by the results of Polynesian migration to New Zealand. He could not predict that in the largest Polynesian city in the world it would be Samoans and Tongans performing that expert hula, or that they would be sufficient to the task. Despite the fact
that *Mele Kanikau* was written in 1975, its themes of cultural authenticity and individual identity have arguably never been more relevant. In the diverse city that Auckland has become, Polynesian statistics may be likened to those criticized by Noa in Act II: indigenous Polynesian people are rejected in education; overrepresented in unemployment and underrepresented in skilled employment; and their traditional dances are appropriated in order to serve the demands of tourism.

When I came to direct *Mele Kanikau* I needed to weave together a number of strands: the setting of the play – Hawai‘i, 1975; the place where I would stage it – Aotearoa, 2013; Kneubuhl’s thoughts regarding dramaturgy and theatre; Kneubuhl’s lack of faith that the play could be staged in New Zealand; Kneubuhl’s pan-Polynesian ideas; the specific cultural demands of the hula as a form and practice; and I also needed to weave into all this my vision of the play. Chapter Three – Building “houses of words” begins to weave these strands into the *kie* and tells the story of how this part of the weaving of the *kie* was achieved.
Chapter Three

Building “houses of words”: The *Mele Kanikau* production story

Frances (Ana Corbett) and Noa (Leroy Lakamu) confront the Waikiki Pageant court.
On the *malae*[^43], a crowd gathers.

The Fale Pasifika has been transformed. The interior, with its thick poles, rising to matching beams and a traditional arched roof, are usually visible from the *malae*, but tonight its internal architecture has been obscured. Instead, the gathering crowd observe that the windows have been covered on the inside with black drapes that conceal their view. The solitary gap is at the centre of the building, only as wide as the double glass doors from which warm light spills onto the Fale steps.

As 8pm draws nearer, the crowd merges into a single line leading to the lone entrance. Hanging above the doorway and framing it is an enormous length of *tapa*[^44], folded many times. Its twin ends form tongues that reach out onto the Fale’s concrete stairs beckoning the audience in. The older Tongans in the assembled crowd recognize the *tapa* as a highly valued *launima*[^45], usually handed down within families and reserved for use on very special occasions as markers of honour.

On a high-backed cane chair, just inside the doorway, sits a Tongan dancer in Hawaiian hula costume with a laptop open, checking audience names off the ‘reserved’ list. When they pass the makeshift box office, the audience realize that they have stepped directly onto the stage, which stretches in a four metre wide strip away from the entry and across the width of the Fale. They are to see a performance in traverse, and the stage is

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[^42]: Boxed sections in this chapter are compiled from my production journal, May, 2013
[^43]: “open space, village green” – (Samoa: Allardice, 2000, p.38).
[^44]: see definition by Te Punga Somerville, p. 143.
[^45]: “launima/langanga: distance of space between two consecutive transverse shapes on a piece of tapacloth...50, a launima” – (Tongan: Tu’inukuafe, p. 282).
confined on both sides by *fala* that lie on the floor, meant for the audience to sit on. Behind these mats on either side are rows of seats rising from two rows at floor level, to two more on raised black platforms that sit nearly a metre off the ground. It is intimate, and some of the audience realize as they enter that there are more people than there are seats. The black drapes that were visible through the windows from the outside turn out to be building paper, which also hangs from the Fale beams to the floor behind the last row of audience. This screens the two curved ends of the building from the view of the audience.

Above the stage, at half the height of the Fale roof, strips of *tapa* hang in folds that allow the audience to see the much higher true ceiling through the gaps. Perceptive, technically inclined audience members might also notice that a freestanding lighting rig has been created to light this new space. The set is a stage within a stage, one type of space within another. The actual stage, however, is simply the usual tiles of Fale floor - it is the audience space that has been transformed.

At the opposite end of the performance area is a smaller, raised platform, decorated with red and yellow plastic lei, looped across the front. On this stage stands a cane throne, slightly askew, and behind this smaller platform, another Tongan *tapa* hangs, providing a backdrop of brownish red. Also on this stage is a small desk, with a typewriter and stool. A Samoan man in his twenties paces the stage in obvius frustration. Every few minutes he sits at the typewriter, prodding it into life and periodically balling up fistfuls of paper and hurling them away. He finally appears to notice the audience and rises, saying, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am the author of the play you are about to see…”

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46 “floor mat” (Tongan: Churchward, 1959, p.135).
These are the Author’s first words. However, it is in his last words that he tells us that our own mele kanikau, or songs of lament, are the “houses of words into which our dead can move and live again and speak to us” (p. 175). For the hundred minute duration between the Author’s first and last words, he (and Kneubuhl through him) has indeed built the houses of words into which the dead have moved, lived, and spoken. As the conduit between Kneubuhl, writing in Hawai‘i in 1975, and the audience, viewing the play in Auckland in 2013, as well as the purported orchestrator of the events that have transpired within the play, the Author has been responsible for building a world in which all of these elements could interact. As the director of Mele Kanikau, I also had to build houses of words. As Taxidou argues “theatre is seen as the civic space that not only partakes in but also, crucially, provides the conceptual and practical tools for ‘world-building’” (2007, p. 181). In building the world of Mele Kanikau, I had to create spaces in which the living and the dead, the actors and audience, the musicians and designers and the entire production team could move. The body of this chapter is divided into two main sections – Direction and Design – to tell the story of the “houses of words” I built for my Mele Kanikau.

**The Theatre, the Vā, and the Kie**

In the introduction, I cited Albert Wendt’s definition of the vā as “the Space-Between-All-Things which defines us” (in Heim, 2012, p. 8) and Kneubuhl says that a Samoan “is marked by his peculiar sensitivity to vā...the physical awareness among Samoans seems to be one of distances between things, distances between people, various distances, depending on the amount of emotion or energy invested in that distance” (Kneubuhl in
Enright, 1989). I added to this Ka’ili’s notion of tauhi vā: “taking care of sociospatial relationships with kin and kin-like members” (2005, p.89). Ka’ili claims that tauhi vā is one of the four principles underpinning the reciprocity of kin and kin-like relationships amongst Tongans. He cites Mike Evans work Persistence of the Gift: Tongan Traditions in Transnational Contexts (2001) for the other three: “‘ofa (love and generosity), faka’apa’apa (respect), and fetokoni’aki (mutual assistance)” (Ka’ili, 2005, p.88). The vā can be defined as the “sacred space” between people. While conventional definitions of “space” conjure up images of absence – the space is where the people and objects are not – instead, the vā is “a space between two objects that is treated as if it were an object itself” (Bennardo, cited in Ka’ili, 2005, p. 90). As such, it requires constant attention, nurturing, negotiating, and cultivating if the relationships between kin are to be healthy and fruitful. Teu le vā and tauhi vā are particularly Polynesian concepts and as a Polynesian theatre-maker conducting practical research, an awareness of and respect for the vā permeates my work in the theatre. The vā is central to my entire journey in the direction and production of Mele Kanikau. Accordingly, in the weaving of this kie, my awareness of the spaces between the strands is as important as the fibres themselves.

In this chapter, the vā is literal and metaphorical, physical and theoretical. It exists in the distances and closenesses between Aotearoa and Hawai’i, between 1975 and 2013, between the afakasi Samoan playwright, the afakasi Tongan director, the Samoan kumu hula, the English lighting designer and the Māori set designer. I am particularly aware of the vā involved in Kneubuhl’s pan-Polynesian dreams, which included a “wild, strange, boyish vision that [he] was going to lead a Polynesian literary movement” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991) and a “great great dream [to be] the Lady Gregory, and the William Butler Yeats, all rolled into one, of the Polynesian twilight...Samoan Vikings of the Celtic
These sacred spaces were considered when imagining and realizing the set within the venue, which was chosen for its pan-Polynesian appeal.

The critical cultural awareness of the vā in this kie is represented by the spaces between its theoretical strands. These spaces allow the kie to be flexible, to bend around the solid theoretical concepts and to mould to my changing shape as its wearer. The spaces are what render the kie a malleable artefact, fluid in its adaptability and suitability to purpose.

I intended for the vā to be respected and nurtured in all of the interactions between cast, crew and our university hosts, and in the act of casting and recruiting, however, this did not always happen. The production journey was rife with problems to be solved and obstacles to be overcome. This chapter also details these and how I, as the director, worked to repair the vā when it had been disrupted.

**Direction**

Kneubuhl acknowledges that the job of the director “is to define a space that actors can move and work in...you create a world in which there are some characters, and then you try to define a space into which they can come alive and move. And it’s as personal and as ruleless, you know, and free as that” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). In turn, I defined the space - the vā - for my actors and built the “houses of words” needed to bring the playscript to life. In these houses of words, the vā can be understood as the “social spaces that are created among kāinga members who are woven together genealogically, like a mat” (Ka’ili, 2005, p.91). Accordingly, this part of the kie, included weaving together a performance script, assembling a design team with the necessary cultural knowledge and
understanding to achieve my vision, forming the 40 person cast to realize the show, and convincingly staging the production, including importantly, the performance of ancient and modern hula.

The politics of representation involved in producing *Mele Kanikau* are complex. In the field of post-colonial Pacific theatre, issues of representation and cultural adaptation are of critical concern. From the outset, I was aware that my *Mele Kanikau* could not be an authentic Hawaiian production, but that it could be a Polynesian, Aotearoa-based production that recognized this, and would pay homage to our Hawaiian brothers and sisters engaged in comparable post-colonial cultural conditions. I knew that in the casting and recruiting for *Mele Kanikau*, although I would probably not be able to include indigenous Hawaiians, that I could certainly recruit Polynesian artists with a deep respect for the *vā* and the cultural knowledge and skills necessary to respectfully portray this important story.

**Hula**

Hula “informs, entertains, heals, and inspires using the human body as an instrument in storytelling. In cultures with no written language, the songs, chants, mantras, and dances of oral literature were the main source of education.” (Stagner, 2011, p. 14). Pavis notes, “theatrical performance and dance visualize this inscription of culture on and through the body” (Pavis, 1996, p. 3). In 2011, Jerry Hopkins, co-author of *The Hula: A Revised Edition*, wrote of the need to “pull all the bits and pieces” of hula scholarship together. He acknowledges Emerson’s well-studied text *Unwritten Literature of Hawai‘i: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (1909), and the work of hula masters writing on their own halau and practices (p. xi). In 2016, hula is becoming a well-documented field of scholarship.
Scholars and practitioners agree that hula “has been a part of entertainment for chiefs and visiting dignitaries from as far back as oral traditions and written sources testify” (Kaeppler, 1993, p. 230). They also agree on some significant dates for traditions of practice in hula. Among them, the edict of the queen regent Ka’ahumanu in 1830 which forbade public performances of the hula (Barrere, Pukui & Kelly, 1980, p. 1; Hopkins, Erikson & Stillman (Ed.), 1982, p. 36), and the enormous revival which took place in 1883, under the Merrie Monarch, King Kalākaua (Stagner, 2011, p. 29; Kaeppler, 1993, p. 24; Barrere, Pukui & Kelly, p.1-2). Important also to this research is the commercialization and appropriation of hula which is further problematized by Kneubuhl, as described in the following strands of the kie.

The forms of hula in my production were both an intrinsic part of the storytelling and markers of the Hawaiian and Pasifika cultures that the play seeks to represent. Within Mele Kanikau, the hula functions symbolically to represent what might be labelled as ‘the traditional versus the modern’. The hula forms, as used within my production, were not intended to correspond accurately to *hula ‘auana* and *hula kahiko* but are rather used to problematize ‘authenticity’. In fact, hula scholar, Amy Ku’ukeialoha Stillman, writes that these categories of hula are “to a great extent, relative concepts” (1998, p.2), and goes on to argue that this distinction has become important since the renaissance in Hawaiian culture in and since the 1970s and that “the juxtaposition of ancient and modern maintains a distinction... between practices that are considered indigenous (i.e., directly continuous or clearly descended from pre-contract practices) and those that are conceived as being Westernized (i.e., clearly incorporating elements of Western and Western-

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47 “informal hula without ceremony, or offering” (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p.88)
48 “Ancient” (Hawaiian: Barrere, D., Pukui, M., & Kelly, M., 1980, p.150)
influenced practices)” (Stillman, 1998, p.2). The dichotomies she describes are precisely how I wanted the hula from the two hula halau to be interpreted. Although the hula used in Mele Kanikau did not directly subscribe to the categories of ‘auana and kahiko (“mele – poetic texts – in the ancient hula kahiko stream, are said to be chanted, in contrast to mele in the modern hula ‘auana stream, which are said to be sung” (Stillman, p. 2)) this was the contrast I wished to represent.

There are three layers of plot in Mele Kanikau, as described on pages 27-30 of the introduction, and at the innermost layer, hula is used to tell the legend of Kahikiloa, Laupi’o and Kea. It was always going to be a challenge to produce two troupes of dancers who would be able to present hula to a high standard of performance – indeed, this was one of Kneubuhl’s concerns in regard to producing Mele Kanikau in Aotearoa New Zealand, as described on pages 110-111. To some extent, the play measures cultural authenticity in terms of the characters’ mastery of the hula, but, as is described further on in this chapter, the Waikiki dancers also need to be masters of the commercialized form. This meant that the kumu hula, appointed to the show needed to be an expert dancer, as well as a professional teacher of hula.

*Pacific Arts Summit, 2010*

I was in the audience of the Pacific Arts Summit at Auckland Town Hall when Aruna Po-Ching stood on stage and announced that she had returned from Australia and opened Aotearoa’s first hula halau. I had always had a secret, burning desire to produce Mele Kanikau, so I introduced myself to Aruna and asked if she would be interested. We exchanged numbers, and in two years, I approached her about being the kumu hula for my production.
As well as her expertise in hula, Aruna has a strong background in theatre in Aotearoa. She was one of the original members of Pacific Theatre, established by Justine Simei-Barton and others in 1987 to cater to a growing demand for Polynesian stories to be expressed and witnessed by an increasingly interested group of palagi and Polynesian New Zealanders alike. In addition to her work with Pacific Theatre, Aruna had also spent some time overseas performing as a Pacific dancer. She is of Samoan descent and learned both hula ‘auana and hula kahiko in Hawaii. Her Hawaiian kumu hula, Blaine Kamalani Kia is a hula master in Hawai‘i. It was important to me that Aruna had these critical connections to Hawai‘i and that her choreographic choices were sanctioned by Kumu Blaine who has an excellent reputation internationally and great mana in the indigenous Hawaiian hula community. Here was transnational tauhi vā in action. Ka‘ili defines transnational tauhi vā as “the cultural practice of forging and sustaining significant social and economic ties across nations” (Ka‘ili, 2005, p.86). It was important that Aruna’s connections to Hawai‘i, and the vā between her and her kumu was strong and healthy, so that it could sustain and foster the creativity required for Mele Kanikau. The concept of cultural authenticity is open to enormous debate, particularly in Hawai‘i, which has been subject to huge cultural appropriation and has borne the impact of colonization by the global superpower of America for well over a hundred years. With this always in mind, and in the vā of my Mele Kanikau, I was aware of the cultural scrutiny that would be brought to bear on my production choices.
10am, Friday, 21st September, 2012

I met with Aruna for a planning meeting for the choreography of *Mele Kanikau*. I explained my vision for the hula performances within the play. I wanted two contrasting hula groups of expert hula dancers who looked completely different, but were each technically excellent. These two groups would be distinguished at surface level as the ‘real’ Hawaiians and the ‘fake’, but during the course of the play, the audience had to be challenged by these convenient definitions into thinking more deeply about ‘authentic’ culture. A substantial casting and audition process would be required, which Aruna would be involved in as the actor playing Noa would need to learn to hula. Together we developed these items with guidance from Kumu Blaine, until they were resolved into the following production-ready pieces:

1. Noa chants after he and Frances arrive at the pageant set. This chant is meant to echo the Author’s story of Georgina reflected in the relationship between Noa, Frances, and Carl. Kamuela dances to this chant (*Mele Kanikau*, p. 113).

In the show, the song ‘Naupaka’ was chosen for this moment in the play. In collaboration with Kumu Aruna, I decided that Noa and Frances and then the Author and musicians would sing this song. We would include three ‘spirit’ dancers from the *halau* who would dance to show their grief at having recently become ghosts and reaching out to Noa and Frances as their kumu hula, to guide them from the darkness. Aruna arranged the verses of the song so that the meaning would reflect the emotions felt by Noa and Frances first in their lament, and then picked up by the Author and the musicians. It was intended to evoke feelings of sadness, mourning, and lament. Kumu Blaine recommended this song as it depicts a story of forbidden love, which fits with the story of Frances and Noa.
2. Waikiki commercial hula – interrupted by CD skipping (Mele Kanikau, p. 119). After many experiments, Kumu Aruna chose the song ‘Hanohano Hanalei’ for this hula. The first recorded versions of the song were too fast for our dancers to follow but she managed to have a technician slow the track and make it possible for our dancers to keep pace. This hula was split in two halves – the first became a very polished, pageant-style hula but then changed into a hula using pou’ili – traditional Hawaiian hula implements that meant our dancers were able to include another, different type of hula that the audience would not have been expecting. At the time of the interrupted hula, the girls were only to perform the first half before Jimmy exclaims, “Shit!” (Mele Kanikau, p. 121) at the skipped track.

3. Noa’s mo’o chant and hula. In this chant, Noa becomes possessed by the mo’o. When Frances tries to intervene, Noa attacks her, which prompts Charles to try to restrain him. This angers Noa further and by this stage, the two male dancers – Pokipala and Kamuela – also become possessed. Noa instructs the two boys to hold Charles while Noa beats Frances. The boys pin Charles to the ground and Noa stands behind Charles and prepares to rape him, at which point Carl enters and throws Noa away from the traumatized Charles. This breaks the possession trance of Noa and the boys and they gradually come to themselves again (Mele Kanikau, p. 131). This chant and hula was the most problematic in terms of choreography and planning. After many attempts using the material from Kumu Blaine, Kumu Aruna realised she would have to change the piece that occurs before the possession. As this would be the first time that the audience would see Noa’s hula halau, I wanted the impression to be shocking and provide a huge contrast to the polished world of Waikiki. To this end, Aruna settled on a procreation hula with accompanying
chant ‘Te Ha’aha’a Nei’. The movements in this hula were highly sexual including lower hip thrusting and suggestive phallic movements of the hands, arms, and hips.

This led well into the possession and attempted rape. It also enabled the halau to be shown as the dancers most in touch with the land of Hawai‘i and her myths. At Kumu Blaine’s suggestion, the possession that followed this hula was an instrumental piece, combining the breathy, hissing sounds of the mo‘o made by the musicians and loud and unsettling guitar and drums. An extra drummer was recruited for the purposes of making the sound richer for this hula and the ‘Pae Moku’ chant that occurs later on in the show. The intention was to make the music so loud and unsettling to the audience that they would feel the nature of Noa’s possession and be disquieted. This, coupled with the horrified reactions of the halau, would combine to make an explosive confrontation.

4. According to Kneubuhl’s script, Kamuela, Pokipala, and Hi‘iaka come on stage during the intermission and rehearse the dance they will perform later (Kneubuhl, p. 137). I opted to change the nature of this scene in favour of including the whole halau in order to allow them to show some of their personalities on stage and to show their awe at being in the theatre. This was to contrast with the opening scenes where the Waikiki dancers are primping, getting ready for their pageant. I wanted that naivety in the halau to come across to the audience and so I intended to put them on stage running hula drills rather than practiced and perfected dances. They entered with four minutes left of the intermission and began running drills, speaking in Hawaiian and marvelling at the Waikiki set around them. This also allowed opportunity for Pokipala (a dancer) to drum
on the *ipu heke* as they practiced their movements. I also intended to have the reverse effect of the ‘slickness’ of the practiced Waikiki hula. This warm-up allowed the Author to move amongst the dancers, invisible to them, but evidently participating in his own story. This fluidity allowed me to present the Author in the process of working out the story. Lauie moved amongst the dancers, echoing their calls and sometimes their movements, as if he was controlling the show and marvelling at his own creations.

5. Pokipala practices an angry hula (*Mele Kanikau*, p. 141). This is the rehearsal for the hula that occurs during the final performance of the pageant cast (as described in the next paragraph). It happens at Frances’ command, and in the script it is meant to entail Kamuela showing Pokipala how to correctly perform his dance movements and anger. As George Latu (playing Kamuela) is not a trained dancer, Folau Lavemai (playing Pokipala) assumed the ‘dance captain’ role within the *halau*. I decided to have both boys dance the angry hula rather than show Kamuela as the more expert dancer.

6. Drums and chant – Noa narrates the story of the commoners and the *ali‘i* and the myth of Kahikiloa, Kea and Laupi‘o. The legend told in this hula is quite long, including a courtship and love triangle, and a paddle hula (*Mele Kanikau*, p. 151-153). This is the biggest set hula piece of the show and adds another echo of the Author’s story to the plot. The songs chosen for this by Kumu Blaine were ‘Ei nei’, ‘Ku’ulei Awapuhi’ and an *oli* entitled ‘Pae Moku.’ These songs and hula were punctuated by Noa’s narration of the legend of Laupi‘o and Kea (the final story that mirrors Noa and Frances). During ‘Ei nei’

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49 “gourd drum” (Hawaiian: Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 103)

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the story of Kahikiloa, who is a young ali‘i and his love for Kea is enacted. Hi‘iaka takes
on the role of Kea and Pokipala becomes Kahikiloa. During the song the court and
audience are told of Kahikiloa, who when visiting Kaua‘i falls in love with the beautiful
Kea. This hula is beautiful, peaceful and places Kahikiloa and Kea at the centre of the
dance. The dance is then interrupted with drumbeats in traditional Hawaiian hula rhythm
as Noa goes on telling the story. At the beginning of ‘Ku’ulei’, Noa introduces Kamuela,
now playing the role of Laupi‘o in the myth, a commoner trusted by Kahikiloa to bring
Kea back to O‘ahu to marry him. However, on the way Kea and Laupi‘o fall in love. This
dance moves from ‘Ei Nei’ (which is mostly in the English language) into ‘Ku’ulei’ (which
uses Hawaiian ‘olelo). The dance becomes faster and shows Kea and Laupi‘o on their
journey. At the end of this hula, the music stops with Kea and Laupi‘o positioned facing
each other centre stage while Kahikiloa watches. The legend ends with Kahikiloa’s angry
hula (earlier rehearsed) stopped by an outraged Carl. The final angry hula was
accompanied by the war chant, ‘Pae Moku’, taught by Kumu Blaine and overlaid with a
musical piece including drum beats and guitar called ‘Ho‘o Ha‘a.’ These two musical
pieces were combined to create a deafening and unsettling scene for the audience, who –
while they were meant to applaud the two earlier pieces – were meant to react in a
different way to ‘Pae Moku’ – a moment of truth and confrontation for Carl.

7. Waikiki commercial hula in full (Mele Kanikau, p. 175).
The final hula is danced by the Waikiki pageant and is the ‘Hanohano’ track in full
including the pou‘ili dance. It is intended that this dance be professional and polished
while the “slick, expert, commercial dancers...smile and smile and smile and smile and
smile, catatonically...” (Mele Kanikau, p. 121).
Reading Mele Kanikau

October, 2012

I spent weeks chasing down a full cast for two public readings of Mele, to be held in the Fale on the 9th and 10th of October – seven months before the actual production. In Canberra, during autumn of 1992, the draft script of Think of a Garden was read. I was fascinated by my supervisor, Murray Edmond’s, description of this event, where the audience and readers created a circle of wild flowers and leaves from the Australian bush and sat around this circle of greenery for the reading. For the beginning of the Mele production journey, I wanted to create a similar situation. I booked the Fale Pasifika and asked my extended family to prepare a traditional Polynesian feast for the event, with two cooked pigs and enough food for fifty people. Members of the Black Friars helped me set up a circle of fala on the ground and chairs in a circle behind them. Because these were public readings, we imagined that the actors would sit in the fala circle and observers could sit behind on the chairs, in accordance with Falesā meeting style.

On the 9th of October - following the protocol of tangata whenua for important events - the cast, crew and creative team and other whanau were formally welcomed into the Fale. This welcome was important and culturally appropriate in Aotearoa-based Pasifika tradition. It was a way to tauhi vā and to pay homage to the indigenous people of Aotearoa. I wanted to show an awareness and consideration of the vā between the Fale and the production team. I meant this to be an important part of the production. In this
way, I was embedding the production in the culture of the University community and of
the Fale itself.

During the October readings, Aruna and her hula *halau* presented a number of
hula, which allowed the cast, crew and audience to see the difference between the ways in
which we would present the Waikiki commercial hula, and the hula of Noa’s *halau*. At the
reading, the Waikiki hula was represented with a dance to the song ‘Sophisticated Hula’
which was a recording and played from a phone. Even though the initial interruption of
this hula is scripted, the cast themselves got a shock when the recording was stopped, and
they thought that the indignant reaction of the hula dancers was real. This was an
important moment for me to see on stage as it gave a small indication of what could
happen during the production. The hula by Noa’s *halau* were slower and relied on the
accompanying drum and chants (*oli*). Kumu Blaine Kamalani Kia was present at this
reading and chanted for Aruna’s *halau*. His performances of the *mele* and *oli* gave the
musicians their first taste of what they would have to produce in the next six months for
the show. This experience was quite daunting for the musicians as Hawaiian music is
different to the types of Pacific music with which they were familiar.

At the readings, the contrast between the CD playing and the live musicians was
strong. I wanted this contrasting use of recorded and live sound to highlight the questions
of authenticity and representation that echo throughout the play. In her review of *Think
of a Garden*, Sinavaiana-Gabbard notes, “Noa and his dance troupe are accomplished in
all things Hawaiian, and their performance of traditional dance and chanting effectively
unmasks the fake glitter and show biz emptiness of the original pageant and its urban,
haolefied performers” (1999, p. 117). It should be noted also, that although the Waikiki
pageant hula are ‘empty’, their dance is represented in a polished, skilled, and otherwise
beautiful way. It was important to the production that both types of hula were performed to a highly polished standard – the Waikiki pageant was meant to inspire admiration in the audience for its beauty and technical skill. The contrast was not between a ‘good’ hula and a ‘bad’ hula, but rather between the different types of Hawaiian-ness, and by implication – authenticity - that each sought to represent.

The readings of the play helped to determine which lines might need cutting. Sections of the Author’s lengthy speeches were the first edited. While I thought the ‘Georgina’ storyline was important to the play’s metatheatricality and layers of plot, there were parts of it that were too wordy and either too difficult to grasp or largely irrelevant to the plot. Through the reading, it became evident that some of the Author’s comments detracted from, rather than enhanced the action of the play. For example, in the speech where he describes Georgina and compares her to Frances, he says that Georgina “could paint water colors, play Chopin and Mendelssohn on the piano, and she pressed little flowers between the pages of a diary she kept” (p. 111). I cut these lines, as they were unnecessary to the Georgina story, and certainly irrelevant to the Frances story. It was enough that the Author describes Georgina as having “been educated in a private seminary for proper young ladies in New Zealand” (p. 111) without the added detail. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Author had an important role navigating the vā. The negotiation that the Author had to make between the audience and the rest of the cast was a profound exercise in fluctuating vā that sometimes stretched to let in sound and light and at other times closed into murmuring darkness. At all times, however, the Author had to be cognizant of the vā and his important role in either keeping the two worlds separate, or in drawing them together.
There were also parts of the dialogue between Noa and Frances, Frances and Carl and Noa and Carl that were better inferred, acted, sung or included in hula rather than spoken overtly. An example of this is an exchange between Noa and Frances:

**FRANCES:** Free me, Noa...free me from my fears.

**NOA:** Soon. Soon we shall be free...Don’t be afraid. (p. 113)

These lines were replaced by Noa and Frances singing together the first verse of a song, ‘Naupaka’ (described in item 1 on page 123), which includes themes of forbidden love, freedom, and fear in its lyrics. A logical editing also occurred with the amalgamation of the characters in the pageant court as I dispensed with some of the characters incorporating six girls into three (Ginger Lei, Maile, Lokalia, Martha, Lynette and Ululani became Ginger Lei, Lokalia and Martha) and four men into one (Joseph, Arthur, Clement and Keoki were represented in the character of Keoki). Because of the amalgamation of characters, Noa’s attack on the court members in Act II became shorter, reduced from 197 lines to 159.

I also made a decision to cut all of the lines uttered by Noa and his *halau* when they return, having been discovered as ghosts. I preferred the silent appearance of the ghosts haunting Carl, rather than, as in the text, the ghosts continuing to declare their love and pondering the future of their own demise and entry to the “murmuring dark.” I wanted the focus to be on Carl and his personal revelation, rather than on the continued presence of the ghosts. Practical, time-based benefits aside, this proved to be a good decision and I felt that the silent reappearance of the ghosts, gazing at a bewildered and then determined Carl, was more effective than the utterance of their words from the script would have been. At this point in the story, the narrative had already passed from the ghosts into the hands of the living Carl to make of it what he will.
In addition to this, there was other minor editing concerning either non-essential individual lines or lines that were intrusive to the existing flow of dialogue. Some of these cuts included a discussion early on in the play between the pageant dancers about a “scrape job” or abortion (p.101) that one of the absent dancers had recently. These lines were cut as they were irrelevant to the plot and character development, and they interrupted the flow of the play’s opening and mood that I wanted to establish. They were also very hard to understand with no pay-off. While there are three acts within the play, my final version included Act I, which lasted 50 minutes, followed by a ten minute intermission, and then Acts II and III which took a further 50 minutes.

**Casting**

In my production, I wanted to acknowledge that “there [is] a need to celebrate and to make sense of the many facets of the Pacific self which is made up of many voices and shifting identities” (Va’ai, 1999, p. 30). Part of my vision for this production was to make use of the “many voices and shifting identities” of Auckland in a Pasifika telling of this Hawaiian story. While Kneubuhl’s playscript is located firmly within the Waikiki pageant world on O’ahu, my production needed to represent that world without ‘pretending’ to be Hawaiian, which my cast would never have achieved. Nearly 200,000 Aucklanders identify as Pasifika and this number is growing. This means that there are increasing numbers of Pasifika people who live in one city, but trace their culture and heritage to other island nations. I wanted our *Mele Kanikau* to be a reminder of the rich cultural heritage we have as Pasifika people, and a warning not to lose sight of this heritage. My casting of the production had two main intentions. I wanted to represent Kneubuhl’s text on stage in a way that was Polynesian and true to Kneubuhl’s vision for a “pan-Polynesian
literary group.” I also intended to directly reflect and represent the Pasifika population of Aotearoa in our casting. Our *Mele Kanikau* was a show for here and now.

**Casting Crises**

Many events in the process of bringing the production together disrupted the *vā*. Relationships and trusts were interrupted and the damage that was done to the communal *vā* had to be repaired. The most damaging of these disruptions occurred in the casting. The supporting actors in my production were a combination of Black Friars and Auckland University Drama students, but the lead actors were special cases. In the playscript, the characters of Noa, Frances and Carl were aged in their fifties. In my vision of an ideal cast, the actors playing Noa and Carl would be Nathaniel Lees and Eteuate Eti respectively. However, it was extremely unlikely that they would be able to participate in my production, even though both of them were supportive of my work on Kneubuhl from the outset. Instead, I made the directorial decision before the initial reading to lower the ages of the lead actors from their mid-fifties to early thirties. It was difficult to find age appropriate actors in the small pool of Auckland’s Pasifika acting community, and I spent some time working on the script with the actors to make sense of this age change.

Through contacts in the performance industry, I tracked down local Pasifika celebrities Rene Naufahu and Joe Folau. Both are active creatives in Aotearoa’s film and television networks. They also knew each other well and had worked together on a number of other projects. Rene’s strong physique and proud manner suited the character of Carl, and Joe’s smaller build and unkempt appearance seemed perfect for Noa. I met with each of them and gave them copies of the script to read through. Frances was more difficult to cast. I talked to our *kumu* hula about this, as Frances is a pakeha/haole woman.
who is able to hula. Aruna suggested Amanda Billing, a *Shortland Street* actor who had recently enrolled in hula lessons in her *halau*. I met with Amanda and she seemed keen to take part.

This casting worked very well at the reading and I believed that I had found the perfect cast for my production, however this was not to be. Rene was the first to jump ship. In March, he explained that he was in the process of directing and producing his first feature length film and would be committed to this, leaving no time for stage work. To his credit, he recommended his younger brother Joe for the role, however this proved futile, as Joe Naufahu was very difficult to pin down. While he seemed keen at first, he failed to come along to any of the rehearsals and then dropped off the radar altogether and was impossible to contact.

Joe Folau initially believed that he would be able to commit to the show and expressed his desire to take on the challenge of playing Noa. However, he also became increasingly difficult to contact. To this day, neither of the two Joes has told me that they no longer wish to be in the play. When I finally managed to talk to Amanda Billing in March, she told me that she would not be able to do the show because her “heart wasn’t in it.” This left me without a lead cast, seven weeks before the production and the departure of these actors left rifts in the *vā* and wide gaping holes in the *kie* that I was trying to weave.

Māori actor Chris Molloy, who was my second choice for playing Carl, had just won a writing position with Taki Rua theatre in Wellington, but he was able to recommend Māori screen actor Rob Williams. Niuean actor, Leroy Lakamu, joined the cast as Noa in late March 2013. Lauie Sila, who played the Author, had worked with him previously, and
recommended him as an experienced stage performer with great skill in physical theatre, developed with Red Leap Theatre Company.

Finding an actress to play Frances turned out to be the biggest problem. I held three open auditions and invited actresses to come along. One woman would have been suitable, but gained fulltime paid employment a week after I cast her as Frances. Finally, at the beginning of April, three weeks before production week, I asked *afakasi* Tongan actress Ana Corbett to play Frances. Lauie, Leroy, and Ana had spent the previous year on tour with a children’s theatre show called Duffy Theatre. In this capacity, these three actors had travelled around Aotearoa promoting “books in homes” in primary schools situated in low socio-economic communities. The Duffy year is an intense one, with two shows a day (often two different schools in the same day), on tour for nine months of the year. The fact that these three actors had worked together before strengthened the ensemble and worked to *teu le vā*, enabling us to progress towards the show again.

The Author

Lauie Sila is a founding member of the Black Friars theatre company and was cast as the Author after his performance in a monodrama that I wrote and directed called *Six Lessons and a Wedding*. This was staged at Auckland University in 2010, Mangere Arts Centre in 2011, and the National University of Samoa in 2012. The monodrama allowed him to show his strong stage presence and his ability to hold the attention of the entire audience on his own, which was a consideration for the casting. From the October reading of *Mele Kanikau*, I was interested in developing his relationship with the audience and his ability to cross between the world of the play and the world of the audience. The Author provides both a bridge and a barrier to the world of the play. I believed that Lauie was skilled
enough to help the audience also transition between the three layers of story in the play. His musical talents were also used in the production to provide vocals for the Hawaiian *mele* and *oli*.

Lauie had one of the most challenging roles to portray without the other actors to play off. He had to work with the script in a way that showed he was in control of the story and its telling – it had to be *his* story – but he also had to show that he was working the story out as he went. He is telling and working out the story of Noa working out the story. I directed Lauie to think of himself as having control of the storytelling, but at times having to carefully balance its components. It was a long process coming to terms with the Author owning the story, rather than simply narrating it. Aspects of Lauie’s performance that helped with this included his ability to physically weave in and out of the other actors who were directed to remain oblivious to his presence, and also his constant presence and participation on the stage as the ‘deliverer’ of the message of the play, emotionally and physically tied to all of its characters and events. He was the most directly available to the audience and therefore was able to move amongst audience and actors alike, breaking the theatrical fourth wall.

**Carl Alama**

It is arguable that *Mele Kanikau* is really Carl’s story. He is the *mo‘i* in the pageant that is rehearsed as well as the one responsible for putting the show together. He is described as a successful travel agent and Frances lists his achievements in Hawaiian society. He is descended from Hawaiian *ali‘i* and is proud of being Hawaiian, despite his lack of ability in the language and knowledge of what the pageant really represents. He is an influential man of high status. Carl sees himself as a good man and thinks that he is doing a great
favour to Noa and Frances by appointing Noa as the *kumu* hula of the pageant. He thinks that in some way, this will redeem him for the way he exiled Noa and Frances from their society when they betrayed him by running away together, and he secretly desires to see Frances again. I wanted the production to be the story of Carl and for the audience to sympathise with his character. This meant that the actor really had to play out Carl’s gentleness and good will so that it would contrast with Noa’s lack of propriety.

Rob Williams, cast as Carl, brought other key dimensions to the production for me, the most significant of which were the political parallels between Māori and Kanaka Maoli as indigenous minorities in their own lands. The staging of this production in Aotearoa with Māori as our tangata whenua created an awareness of the echoes of cultural loss. One of the significant threads of the play focuses on Carl’s journey and the inner cultural revolution he undergoes realising the truth about his people and the travesty that his Waikiki pageant represents. This casting recognised and sought to honour the similarities between Aotearoa and Hawai‘i in terms of language loss, and perhaps the recent resurgence of the *reo/ōlelo* in schools and communities. In addition, while there are strong linguistic similarities between all the Polynesian languages spoken by members of the cast, Te Reo Māori and Hawaiian ʻōlelo were the most similar language groups.

In terms of physical appearance, Rob fit the role of Carl well. Described as “a handsome Hawaiian in his mid-fifties: a charmer” (Kneubuhl, p.103), Carl is in command of the pageant world. Rob’s height of 191cm and his strong and muscular build provided a vivid contrast to Leroy who played Noa. He truly was a “striking mō‘ī” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.109).
Noa Napo’oanaakala

While it may be logical to argue that the story of Mele Kanikau belongs to Carl, Noa is clearly essential to the plot and fulfils in various situations, the roles of both hero and villain. Noa enters the world of the pageant and disrupts its foundations. As a kumu hula from a “grass hut” (p.105), Noa is ‘in touch’ with nature and the spirited roots of Hawai’i’s pre-colonial past. Noa teaches traditional hula and refuses to obey social etiquette, saying, “I drink. I like to drink. I like to get drunk. Why hide it?” (p. 126). In the past, Noa has been Carl’s best friend, and Frances’ lover, a dancer and a traditional Hawaiian kumu hula but he has died, and at the time of his entrance to the world of the play, he is a ghost. He speaks the ‘ōlelo fluently and recognizes that language and cultural practices, such as the hula, have an important, vital and vibrant place in the survival of culture. As the backstory to the play is gradually revealed, the audience learn that Noa worked for Carl in his travel agency and betrayed Carl by falling in love with Frances, Carl’s fiancé. I pictured Noa to be hard drinking and acerbic, wiry and strong. I wanted the character to be played physically, embodying the mo’o that possesses him at the end of Act I, and able to hula and to portray convincingly the role of the hula master.

It was apparent at his first reading that Leroy would be able to undertake the complexities of playing this pivotal role. In his third year monologue performance at Toi Whakaari, National Drama School, he had created and performed the role of a drunk, Polynesian man - a character very similar to Noa. Leroy was able to learn the basic elements of hula very quickly and coupled this with his skill in physical theatre to show his possession by and transformation into a mo’o (lizard). Combined with his willingness to learn hula, this meant that Leroy was physically well able to fulfil the demands of playing Noa. Leroy’s shorter stature provided an excellent counterpoint to the height of
Rob’s Carl – giving the audience a striking physical difference to think about when contemplating the choice that Frances made between the two men. Leroy rose to the additional challenge of delivering lines in Hawaiian ‘ōlelo and in Kneubuhl’s idiosyncratic English. In the Theatreview review of the play, Leroy was commended for “the stand-out and central performance of the night” (Taouma, 2013) portraying the important role of Noa with passion and conviction.

**Frances Corrington**

Frances is haole but in many ways is more ‘Hawaiian’ than her Hawaiian counterparts, of whom she is very critical and even damning at times. An educated woman from a rich family, she is described by Lydia as Noa’s “haole mistress” (p.105). Her parallel, Georgina, is the only named character in the Author’s story, and as he tells Georgina’s story in an attempt to work out why she made the choices she did, he is also working out the story of Frances. Frances is fluent in Hawaiian and the scene where she finally confronts Lydia is significant in that she, the haole is speaking Hawaiian to the Hawaiian ali‘i who is only able to understand English. I was careful about casting this role as the actress needed to be able to pronounce Hawaiian very convincingly, but also would have to appear to be pākehā. She also needed to be a convincing partner for the kumu hula and therefore needed to look as though she was at home coaching the characters Kamuela and Pokipala in their hula.

Like Leroy, Ana is a graduate of Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School. Although she is an afakasi, rather than full haole, Ana made a convincing Frances, fitting very well with the rest of the pan-Polynesian cast. We had to consider ways in which we could make her appear to be more pākehā and this was accomplished through
mannerisms on the stage as befitting a “quiet spoken...born patrician” (Kneubuhl, p.106). Ana also coloured her hair a lighter blonde/brown colour for the duration of the show.

Ana had the task of playing the woman torn between Carl and Noa and the dynamics of this love triangle allowed for a variety of tensions to be played in different ways throughout the play. The fact that Leroy and Ana had studied and worked together previously was also significant, as, at late notice, the Frances/Noa relationship seemed close and convincing from the outset. Ana’s singing ability was also used. She and Leroy sung the first verse of ‘Naupaka’ (discussed in the ‘ekolu section further in this chapter) as a duet, allowing the action to flow from them, to the spirit dancers, to the Author and the musicians, back to the exiting dancers and then returning to Noa and Frances who remained in tableau for the duration of the song.

Lydia Jenkins

Lydia is an essential, if two-dimensional character. She provides a female foil for Carl and a counterpoint for Frances, and she represents the entire pageant world of Waikiki. She is a descendant of the Kamehameha line and is infinitely proud of this, despite the fact that she cannot speak Hawaiian. She is superior, proud, righteous, arrogant, haughty, beautiful, and used to getting her way. She is described as “statuesque” in the script and I wanted to cast this role with a feisty young Pasifika woman who would occupy the pageant throne convincingly.

Samoan actress Olive Asi was cast as Lydia Jenkins. She is confronted in the play by Frances – the haole who has more knowledge of her cultural heritage and language than Lydia does. In the October readings Olive filled this role with convincing pride and passion. She assumed a very regal and superior attitude and had already learned many
of the lines. The scene that stood out in Olive’s depiction of Lydia was her confrontation with Frances. This is the moment where Kneubuhl calls the Hawaiians to task for the loss of their own culture (Sinavaiana-Gabbard, 1999; Johnson, 1997). Sinavaiana-Gabbard acknowledges that “While Kneubuhl had a vision of the kinship ties that bind all Polynesians culturally, his articulation of that vision in the plays is often deeply problematic in ways that seem to blame modern Hawaiians for their colonized status and their cultural losses” (2006, p. 211). In the case of Mele Kanikau, this blame is laid by Frances, the only haole character, who says “here you are, locked in your make-believe world, this cheap – this pathetic – pageant...I am real, my Noa is real, but who are you, you contemptible fake?” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p. 128). Throughout each reading and rehearsal, Lydia was the strong, loud and self-confident, Polynesian woman utterly convinced of her own righteousness.

Charles Kelsoe

I include Charles in the list of lead characters as he goes through a great deal of trauma in the course of the play and experiences change (and enlightenment) by its resolution. Two actors – Billy Revell and Daley Winterstein – in alternate performances filled this role. I had originally intended Billy to play Charles, but during the rehearsals leading up to our production, Billy was involved in another show and his ability to attend our rehearsals was limited. Daley was originally the stage manager for Mele Kanikau, but due to having to read the part of Charles so many times, he learnt the role. I thought it was the fairest thing to do to have them both have turns at playing Charles and another minor character in the court called Keoki. Charles Kelsoe is the character of the stage manager in the production. Charles is a peace-making, competent, but vulnerable character, and is the
only other character to share with Carl the realization that Noa and his troupe have been ghostly spirits paying a farewell visit. Like Carl, Charles is a Hawaiian confronted with questions about his cultural identity at the play’s close. From the initial reading, both of them were able to convey this, as well as the vulnerability of Charles, abused by Noa in one of his hula. Charles’ relatively ready forgiveness of Noa’s actions is also an important part of his character – he is ready to move on from past mistakes, to learn, and to become a better Hawaiian. One of the challenges for both actors was to deliver the line “For the first time in my life Carl, I feel like – I feel like a Hawaiian” (p. 173). This line is challenging because, although it is very important to the story, it is so emotionally loaded that it can easily sound melodramatic and induce laughter from the audience who do not take it seriously. I directed Billy and Daley to play the line quietly, directly to Carl, and to underplay, rather than overplay the emotion of it. This was effective and both of them were able to convince the audience of Charles’ ‘conversion’ to Carl and Noa’s way of thinking. At the end of the play, Charles is the only one left in the pageant who knows the truth about what has happened on the set. At the play’s end, when Carl leaves the set determined to be more Hawaiian, Charles remains in the pageant world, wondering if he should do the same thing. As the play closes, the pageant begins again but it has lost all of its joy for Charles. He calls to Bella “Lydia wants us to do the whole thing, okay? The flowers and stuff. Eveything. Even the goddamn rainbow” (p.174). Charles no longer appreciates the glitter and glamour of Waikiki.

Pageant Cast vs Hula Halau

Aotearoa Pasifika education specialist Faaea-Semeatu supports the idea of the fluidity of cultural identity in terms of a continuum that fluctuates between “identity confusion” and
“secured identity” (2010, p.119). Likewise, while it is convenient to think of the two groups of Hawaiians in *Mele Kanikau* as polar opposites, cultural identity is more complicated than this. Both the *halau* and the pageant dancers are real Hawaiians. Similarly, Noa and Carl do not simply represent the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’. Instead, it is arguable that Noa represents what Carl has lost, and more significantly, Noa stands for what Carl has lost and what he *does not know* he has lost. Noa says “but you don’t know what you’ve lost! And if you don’t know that – you are not a Hawaiian.” In addition, the position of Frances, the play’s only *haole* character, is interesting as she appears to know what has been lost, but is also “not a Hawaiian” (p.148). She is shown as having abandoned a life of ease in society, and is described as “a pee place worth fifteen million dollars” (p.126) by Noa when he is attempting to provoke Carl. Her choice to leave the society of her family and peers to live with Noa in his grass hut settlement is questioned but unexplained in the play, and is also a source of the Author’s consternation with the Georgina character who also left her home and family to live with a Samoan “man of no education. Not even by native standards” (p.111). Both Frances and Noa appear to occupy an extreme position, opposed to the cheapening of Hawaiian culture for the tourist market and are particularly critical of the Hawaiian *ali‘i*. Haunani-Kay Trask, one of the most outspoken voices of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement quotes Kehau Lee, saying, “Our country has been and is being plasticized, cheapened, and exploited. They’re selling it in plastic leis, coconut ashtrays and cans of ‘genuine, original Aloha.’ They’ve raped us, sold us, killed us and still they expect us to behave” (Kehau Lee on evictions of Hawaiians from Native Lands, 1970, in Trask, 1993). The degradation and exploitation of Hawaiian culture is a part of the criticism offered by Frances of the play’s Jubilee Festival Pageant. She criticizes Carl’s pageant as “cheap” and “pathetic.” Noa’s similar concern is expressed through his
mourning of the feathers of the birds that have gone to “make capes and helmets for the ali’i... the goddamned ali’i” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.115). These are the same birds that Frances says have been gone since before he was born. The birds – “mamo, o’o, i’iwi” (p.115) are strongly linked to what has been lost from Hawaiian culture. This knowledge of what has been lost is fundamental to Noa’s criteria for being a ‘real’ Hawaiian.

7pm, Monday, 11th March, 2013
(seven weeks to opening)

I organised with Aruna an open audition for hula dancers and we sent a notice of this out through our own creative networks as well as through the Pacific Dance and University systems. Around twenty women arrived on the evening, from a wide range of Pasifika dance backgrounds. Aruna ran hula drills with them and then introduced some choreography to see which dancers were able to master the hula. Then each auditionee presented their prepared Pasifika dance. From this audition, Aruna and I divided the dancers into the two groups. Each auditionee could dance, but those who had experience or showed potential in hula were cast in the halau, and those who did not joined the pageant.

This casting of the hula groups was integral to the success of the production. The halau girls consisted of three experienced hula dancers: Maggie Tulisi, a Samoan-Niuean dancer from Aruna’s halau; Theresa Sao, a Samoan dancer from Halau Moana Nui a Kiwa; Iva Hitila, also Samoan, from Hula o Kahelelani no Aotearoa. These three formed the hula core of Noa’s halau and Aruna’s choreography. Central to the production also was Natalie Toevai, cast as Hi’iaka who plays the heroine, Kea, in the legendary hula at the climax of
the play. Natalie was a Samoan, second year Auckland university student, and a dancer with Polynesian dance company, Ura Tabu. The *halau* was completed with the addition of Atina Patau, also a Samoan Auckland University student; Marissa Elgarico, a Filipino-Irish University exchange student belonging to Naneanani Hula Halau in Washington State; and ʻIlaise Sekona, a Tongan drama student from Wesley College.

The Waikiki pageant was a combination of dancers who auditioned and actors from the main cast. Leading this group as dance captain, was Donna Mason, a *palagi* dancer from Aruna’s halau; Samoan Auckland University students Samora Kake, Jamaliette Tuiletufuga and Jacqueline Westerlund; Lucy Downe, another Tongan Wesley College drama student; Viola Johansson (Tongan-Swedish), Ashleigh Niuia (Niuean-Māori) and Simulata Pope (Tongan-Niuean), cast members from the Black Friars.

The Waikiki dancers function as an extension of Lydia and other characters in the pageant court including Keoki, Ginger Lei, and Lokalia who appear as two dimensional and plastic as the *leis* they wear. This plasticity is one of the elements of the drama. It is extremely unlikely that any Waikiki hula dancer would wear plastic lei to perform, however the extreme emphasis that Kneubuhl places on the use of the plastic *lei* from “Nakaguchi’s authentic Hawaiian novelty shop”, functions to further enforce the contrast established between the two hula groups. Lydia’s comments about the Hawaiian *mo‘i* speech written by Noa as being “a big waste of time: nobody’s going to understand it” (p.120) and her attacks on Noa, Frances and then Carl in Act III, further substantiate this. She is arrogantly proud of her *ali‘i* status, but does not know what it is to be a “real” Hawaiian. Lokalia, Ginger Lei and Keoki attempt to defend themselves against Noa’s attacks on them in Act II, but again, they are unaware of what has been lost.
In reviewing Kneubuhl’s *Think of a Garden* trilogy, Sinavaiana-Gabbard says that in *Mele Kanikau* “we see formal play with the frequent slippages and tensions in cultural identity markers – Samoan, Hawaiian, “Polynesian”, mixed-blood, local, tensions between material and spiritual worlds, lived and staged realities, themes of personal responsibility and freewill” (2006, p. 212). Her observation supports the fact that rather than a simple world of absolute opposites, the world of the play contains cultural tensions. I wanted to present in my production the very strong potential for cultural growth and change. Carl, and to some extent Charles, are the characters that are seen to grow in their Hawaiian-ness becoming aware of that which has been lost. In the creative vision for the show, I had to consider how to stage these character changes in the two-dimensional world of Waikiki. Noa says that he returns out of his aloha for Carl and this is important. Noa’s return shows that all of the cultural types appearing on stage have the potential to change and to re-learn what has been lost, and although we are unaware of where Carl goes as he leaves the pageant set, we are assured that he will grow in his knowledge of what it is to be Hawaiian and to be himself. The best way to reflect this in the staging of this scene was to have him leave the set in the same direction that Noa had moments earlier, away from the thrones that represented the pageant world of Waikiki.

**Music and Sound**

Music within the production was played live by musicians with the exception of the pageant hula, which was a recording played through a sound system. The pageant hula was a recorded track in order to reflect the pre-packaged, tourist-friendly version of the modern hula that is portrayed and then discredited within the play. In contrast, the other
mele and oli were performed live by the production musicians in order to show the immediacy and power of Noa and his hula halau – arguably, the ‘authentic’ Hawaiians.

The musical director was Misipele Tofilau closely assisted by Saia Folau. Misipele is Samoan, with a background in traditional Pasifika music and church choir, and is the musical director of the Black Friars. He has been an itinerant secondary school music teacher, and plays most instruments, including traditional Polynesian instruments. He also provided the pageant ‘Voice’ within the script. His deep, bass voice was appropriate for hosting the tourist pageant and for leading the Hawaiian music in the play. Saia Folau is Tongan and a current Music student at the University of Auckland. He plays in the band Loose Change, and has been an itinerant music teacher in South Auckland. Recently, he was the musical director of ‘I Am’, a show about Youth Suicide, which played in Wellington and Auckland during November 2012 and of ‘Shine’ on the same theme in 2013. Saia is the strongest of our vocalists, also playing guitar and drums.

The musical advisor for the show was Penisimani Tapueluelu, also Tongan, and a member of the award-winning Pasifika reggae band Three Houses Down. Peni is familiar with Hawai‘i and Hawaiian music, a graduate of the University of Auckland and a music teacher in South Auckland. He sourced some of the instruments needed for the show and provided advice to the musical team, contributing to the show’s overall creative vision.

To utilize the lead actors’ musical talents, I had Lauie, Leroy and Ana sing some of the production songs. I wanted the music to evoke setting, mood and character, as well as to portray the multi-cultural nature of the casting and to show the way in which the theme of cultural representation lies underneath the Hawaiian language and characters depicted on stage.
One of the most humbling experiences for me as the director was to see the beautiful young Polynesian members of the cast develop their own cultural skills and understandings. One of the foremost of these experiences was the two days in March spent with Kumu Blaine and the Black Friars musicians at Aruna’s house as the musicians had a crash course in Hawaiian music and hula. My family again prepared a Tongan feast and brought this to Aruna’s house where both groups – Kumu Blaine and his halau, visiting from Hawa‘i, and my musicians – exchanged food, music, and dance as we learned from each other and rehearsed and developed the music that was so vital to the show.

The physical position of the musicians on the stage was also important. For practicality’s sake, I wanted to have the musicians close to the tech booth to address any sound issues that might arise. Aesthetically, I knew that the musicians would also bring a strong physical presence to the show and so I wanted them to be on stage but also next to the audience, increasing the power of the intimacy of the production.

The walk-in music for the audience’s entry into the theatre was canned sound coming from the same artist and soundtrack as the Waikiki hula track. This album was by Charles K. L. Davis, recorded in the 1960s and underneath the music, the sound of a record-player stylus in the grooves of a turning record was discernible. This added a quality to the sound that I hoped would help with establishing the 1975 setting for the play, and set up the Waikiki pageant world of ‘plastic’ music. This forced a contrast for the audience between this music with the live music produced by the five, big, aloha-
shirted invading musicians who arrive at a point when the show has already begun. I hoped that their physical entry would firstly supplement Noa’s troupe, and also draw the attention of the audience to the presence of live music, which they might have taken as given had the musicians been in place on their arrival. In addition, their exit with Noa when he is banished from the pageant left an absence felt by the audience, particularly when the final Waikiki hula music played.
DESIGN

Creating theatre in a space that was fundamentally not designed for the type of performance I had in my directorial vision, was always going to be a challenge. It would require much experimentation with a very physical *vā*. In addition, the designers I chose would need to be able to navigate a cultural *vā* that would recreate a world in which a 1975 Waikiki pageant might take place, but a world that was also, very definitely, the Fale Pasifika at the University of Auckland in 2013. I knew that I would need innovative lighting and set designers to build the houses of words through which *Mele Kanikau* could speak to us. The design team comprised set designer, Raukura Turei, and lighting designer Nik Januirek.

1:30, Friday, 21st September, 2012

I met with Raukura Turei, the architect who would become set designer for *Mele Kanikau*. At my Doctoral Skills induction day, I explained my creative project to a group of other PhD students. A woman in my discussion group asked if I had heard of Raukura, whose Master of Architecture project had been designing performance spaces for Te Whare Tapere. I did a quick google search which revealed that Raukura’s Masters thesis was entitled ‘Looking Up Skirts – Te Hīki a Hine-Ruhi’ where she argues that she was: “responding to the anomaly that New Zealand has never prioritised theatre space for the performing arts of the Pacific, this project investigates the historic precedent of Te Whare Tapere coupled with contemporary thinking to offer a spatial reality to the current revival of this traditional Māori practice” (Turei, 2011). Raukura also served as a Tuakana at the University of Auckland.
Raukura and I considered the use of tapa to create a performance space and what would essentially serve as the ‘wings’ of the stage and a backstage area. Again, we were negotiating the vā of the theatre and how best to teu le vā, or beautify that space. The tapa was to hang from the beams of the Fale, which are five metres high. We were informed that we would be unable to fix anything to the beams of the Fale or to any part of its wood structure, so this tapa would need to be draped over the beams. The internal construction of the Fale is entirely of materials indigenous to Polynesia and we were not allowed to interfere with this in any way by sticking, nailing, or stapling anything to any of the surfaces. Draping large sheets of tapa over the beams seemed to be one viable answer to the question of creating the space and improving the acoustics. Tapa is a material found across the Pacific although the patterns and textures differ slightly from country to country.

Tapa is simultaneously regional and specific. Although the paper mulberry plant itself is found around the region, having been carefully and painstakingly carried in seed form as a part of the migration across the ocean, and though most of the processes of collecting, preparing, and finishing the bark bear strong relation to each other, the cloth produced in every region of the Pacific is distinctive (Te Punga Somerville, 2012, p.4). I wanted to use tapa, as firstly, it would enhance, rather than detract from the Fale design and secondly, because it would support the vā and the pan-Pasifika vision I had for the production.

A bird motif runs throughout the play: “Feathers are hard to get. There aren’t many mamo or o’o any more...How sad that sounds, just saying their names. O'o, mamo, i'iwī, o'u...a mele kanikau of birds’ names” (p.114). The birds come to represent the life and
death of Hawaiian culture, and their absence is noted and mourned by the characters of Noa and the Author. I initially thought that this could also be supported visually, with strips of silk running down the centre of the tapa with the barest of outlines of these birds painted on the silk, rising from floor to ceiling. Eventually, Raukura and I dismissed this idea, as the area I wanted the audience to focus on was the catwalk-like strip across the centre of the Fale. The birds were instead conjured in the actors’ words; firstly in an emotional scene where the saddened Noa takes Frances in his arms and grieves for the little lives that have been lost, and then mirrored in the final words of the Author and the play as a whole.

Figure 2 – aerial view of Fale ceiling structure with tapa pieces suspended over stage area
In February, choices about the ceiling frame were made after Raukura had constructed a 1:50 scale model using tapa squares, which she eventually decided against. Raukura wanted to let more light in from above the frame and I wanted the audience to be able to see past the frame and up into the ceiling of the Fale beyond our set. We settled on strips of tapa and the frame illustrated in Figure 3.
I opted to use tapa at each end of the stage. At one end, it would form the backdrop to the raised platform holding the thrones for the pageant king and queen. The red tinge of this tapa highlighted the gaudy red and yellow flowers and material used to decorate the throne area. At the other end, tapa hung as shown in Figure 4. This 50 foot Tongan launima tapa hung in large folds with the pattern folded inwards so that the audience saw only the ‘white’ side. I used the tapa as a frame for some of the action of Noa and the halau ghosts.
I was constantly challenged by the problem of creating a performance space that represented a performance space. Raukura and I thought about including in the design for the tapa ceiling the ability to move the tapa gently so that it could move with the dancers. This would also have had an effect on the staging of the ghosts who I imagined would cause the tapa to move as they emerge from the “murmuring darkness” of the world between life and death. This proved impractical in the end, and Raukura, Nik, and I moved on to focus on how the play of light on the tapa surfaces could be utilized.

Figure 5 - launima tapa framing the exit/entrance
Monday, 3rd September, 2012

I met with Nik Januirek, the lighting designer for Mele Kanikau. Andrew Malmo, with whom I had worked at Auckland Theatre Company, recommended him to me. Nik had worked on a wide range of professional shows around the world, taught technical design at AUT and Unitec, and had been the technical manager at the Maidment Theatre as well as the lighting designer and technical manager for the Pasifika dance company, Black Grace. Nik sent me pictures of his lighting work with Conch theatre’s Fijian show Masi (2013). In this show, Nik used lighting to effectively work with tapa, which fit with the vision that I had for my production.

Nik had the challenge of creating a lit theatre in a difficult space. Because nothing could be fixed to the walls or beams of the fale, the lighting design had to be freestanding. Some of the options for lighting included erecting a truss that would support a full lighting rig, creating smaller lighting rigs that would hang over the beams of the Fale without using screws or anything adhesive or combining lighting from the floor and freestanding poles supporting a few lights each standing next to the existing Fale pillars. A full lighting rig, with its visible presence working against the natural, holistic environment of the Fale, seemed to defeat the purpose of using the Fale and would have been intrusive within the space. Nik’s initial ideas consisted of a lighting design would include a combination of floor lighting, free standing lighting poles and small lighting rigs that supported by the Fale’s beams, however floor lighting was soon deemed impractical. I wanted the audience to feel intimately connected to the action on the stage, and to share the vā with the actors and musicians. I wanted to remove any barriers between them and the action that would take place. Floor lighting would have interfered with this vision, and so Nik designed the
lighting rig shown in Figure 6 which mainly consisted of lighting supported by scaffolding standing at either end of the Fale and across the overhead beams.

**Figure 6 - lighting design**

I discussed with Nik the importance of being able to evoke the nature of the ghosts via the lighting design and he incorporated some cool-toned lighting that subtly changed the mood of scenes including the ghosts in a way that was intended to make the audience feel the change, but not extreme enough to alert them directly. Nik also had the challenge of creating work lights and house lights from the rig, which he would not have had to do in a purpose-built theatre. Some of the other problems encountered were the usual challenges of presenting a show in traverse and these were exacerbated by our inability to
affix anything to the Fale structure. Nik constructed scaffolding at either end of the stage area and above Raukura’s tapa ceiling frame. We also had to counter other issues including the very real danger of fire with the lights hanging so closely to the tapa and live plants included in the set design. Each tapa that was in danger of touching any of the lights had to be firmly tied back, and the pot plants had to be strategically angled away from the bulbs.

**Stage & Audience**

For the production, the Fale was finally transformed into the space described at the beginning of this chapter. The stage stretched long ways across the width of the Fale from the front door of the *malae* to the opposite side. The stage was a rectangle at ground level, framed by *fala* spread on the floor at the stage edges. Seating was stepped up from the *fala* on the floor up three layers to the back row, where the audience were seated on chairs on black rostra standing a metre off the ground. Enclosing the audience were six-metre black drops of building paper hung from the Fale beams to the ground. At the *malae* end, the fifty-foot tapa hung in folds reaching from the high beams to the ground where the long ends on either side of the arch were laid out on the floor, reaching from the stage space out through the doorway where the audience entered. The audience entered through this tapa archway to get to their seats on either side of the stage, each side seating around 50 people. At the opposite end of the stage was a raised throne area, backed by red *tapa* and holding two wicker peacock chairs as thrones. This stage within a stage was decked in red and yellow plastic flowers and red material with a Pacific print. At the four corners of the stage were potted palms. Across the ceiling the framework of tapa strips were hung diagonally across the stage. These strips were loosely looped over tension wire.
and bamboo to create waves of tapa across the ceiling, through which the audience could also see the high, rounded roof of the Fale building. The visible fibres of tapa and bamboo complemented each other. The brown stage floor of the Fale, and the tapa ceiling made a continuous strip of brown through the black box we created with the hanging black builders’ paper. This was intended to draw the audience’s attention to our stage, at the centre of the building. The Fale was de-familiarized and a different interior was created to the one the University community was used to seeing.

The black drapes effectively screened both of the rounded ends of the Fale, allowing this space to become dressing rooms for the cast and crew. Although the drapes did little to mask backstage sound, they were very effective creating a more intimate performance space in what is essentially quite a large building. Above all, the stage worked to support the conflicts of the play between the ‘authentic’ and the ‘fake’ Hawaiians, with the pageant cast largely occupying the throne end of the stage and the ghosts at the other, outside end.

**OUR MELE**

My production of *Mele Kanikau* occurred at the junction of several different disciplines and schools of thought. While Kneubuhl’s playscript combines elements of traditional Samoan theatre and metatheatrical Modernist practices, my production adds to this combination the politics of representation – compounded by the double act of representation inherent in my pan-Polynesian cast, and the particular relevance of the message of cultural caution to Pasifika people residing in Aotearoa. It also continues Kneubuhl’s warnings about the impact of globalization and the commodification of Polynesian culture.
Producing Kneubuhl’s playscript was an act of critical research. It enabled me to actively analyse via staging, modernist practices in a post-colonial Pacific context. In The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism, Pericles Lewis, argues that Modernism takes into account “the shared apprehension of a crisis in the ability of art and literature to represent reality” (2007, p.xviii). I was aware of this crisis of representation in my production and thus conscious of the scrutiny that it would be subjected to. How could Pasifika people living in Aotearoa hope to represent the Hawaiian pageant world and its counterpart, the schools of ancient hula? The answer was in what Lewis describes as the “shared apprehension” of this crisis. There are strong parallels between the world that Kneubuhl wrote into being and the world that I, and my cast, crew and audience currently inhabit. There are strong parallels in the vā of Kneubuhl’s Hawai‘i and my Aotearoa. The people involved in my production and I were like Kneubuhl – both outside and inside the world we sought to represent. Taxidou describes a “category of otherness” which is “the centre and kernel of much post-colonial thought [and] plays a constitutive role in the aesthetics and politics of most of the theatres of Modernism” (Taxidou, 2007, p. 119). It was our “otherness,” shared with the indigenous people of Hawai‘i, which allowed me to stage this production in a space and place relevant to Pasifika people here and now. The ability to stage this otherness is evidence of the continued importance of Kneubuhl’s work to post-colonial Polynesia.
In the closing scene, the Waikiki hula, which seemed glamourous, full, and beautiful at the beginning of the play, has been emptied of its former magic. Instead, the canned music seems thin and less “real” than the music made by the (now vanished) musicians. The colourful costumes have been rendered artificial compared to the live greenery that was worn by Noa’s halau. The dancers themselves seem like pale and inferior copies of something authentic that has been lost. Shadows and echoes of Noa’s halau remain to haunt us. The hula that the audience were initially eager to see has been tainted by the last 100 minutes, and if the play has worked – the audience has been moved. They too, have been haunted by mamo... o’o... i’iwi.

And when the play is done, the audience – like Carl – will follow the path of Noa and the ghosts, through the launima-framed Fale doorway, and into the “murmuring darkness.”
Halau dancers Iva Hitila, Atina Patau and Maggie Tulisi try to intervene as Noa attacks Frances.

Chapter Four

E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina: six critical readings of Mele Kanikau
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.


This chapter is particularly concerned with what Kneubuhl describes as the search for the “authentic act” in the theatre. In the Introduction, I cited Kneubuhl’s claim that theatre “is our search for our authentic self... Everyone’s all caught up in the search for reclaiming identities” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Chapter Four also analyses Mele Kanikau through six lenses from the discourses of theatre-making. The overall concern of ‘E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina’ is to address the second of the research questions:

- How does the meta-drama of John Kneubuhl’s Mele Kanikau function to reveal, develop, and problematize the drama of authenticity played out in the play?

Within the framework of this question, the chapter also investigates the questions of representation and authenticity in the theatre introduced on page 12: Who has the right to represent, critique or criticise another’s culture? How well suited is the theatre to deal with the complex paradox of representing authenticity? How can the un-representable be represented?

This chapter picks up the weaving of the kie beginning with a close reading of the scene from my production of Mele Kanikau titled here ‘E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina’ (p.120).
The scene occurs shortly after Noa Napo‘oanaakala and his “haole mistress” Frances arrive on the set of Carl’s Jubilee Pageant. Carl as the new kumu hula, at this point in the text has employed Noa, and Noa has taken over the direction of the pageant. He interrupts the highly polished, but seemingly ‘inauthentic’ Waikiki dancers to re-write the pageant script. Noa calls on Carl to deliver a speech in Hawaiian about the legend that Noa has created to replace the hula of the pageant dancers. When Carl stands to read the speech at this point in the play it is with his entire Waikiki pageant cast watching him. He is embarrassed because he cannot read the Hawaiian despite his ali‘i lineage and despite the fact that in the pageant he is playing a Hawaiian King. Noa has come into his world, disrupted it and seems determined to humiliate him in front of his people:

Noa interrupts the hula.

NOA: This is where you read your speech, Carl...Would you try it please?

CARL: (Taking out the speech) You want me to read it in Hawaiian?

NOA: Well, it isn't written in Japanese is it?

CARL: No. E nā kānaka o ka ‘āina...? (He murders every word)

NOA: (Correcting) E nā kānaka o ka ‘āina...

(Kneubuhl, 1997, pp. 119-120)

This scene presents the first substantial clash between the Waikiki Hawaiians and Noa and his halau, represented at this point by the musicians because the dancers have not yet arrived. Immediately prior to this scene, the pageant dancers have entered to perform their hula, where I directed them to span the length of the traverse stage. In our production, at the point where Noa called out “Hold it!” I instructed the chorus to sit down in a long line, essentially filling the space between Noa, positioned at the ‘outside’ end of
the stage, and Carl, raised on his throne. This meant that this dialogue passed over the
dancers’ heads in both a literal and metaphoric sense. The presence of the dancers and
the musicians provided an ‘on-stage’ audience for the conflict between Noa and Carl. The
musicians were positioned on Noa’s side of the argument and ridiculed Carl in his
attempts to speak Hawaiian. Carl’s Waikiki dancers were on Carl’s side and were ignorant
of the language themselves. Their role was to be loyal to their mo‘i, their pageant king,
and their employer. Outside, and in addition to these two factions, sat the ‘real’ theatre
audience, keeping intact, so to speak, the boundaries between the real and the unreal.
With his clear knowledge and command of the language, Noa is positioned as the ‘real’
Hawaiian and the theatre audience were expected to know this. However, they are also
led to have a great deal of sympathy for Carl, whose fool’s errand to reconcile with Noa by
doing what he sees as a good and charitable deed is doomed from the start. The way that
Rob played Carl in this scene with a plausible agreeableness allowed us to sympathise
with Carl, whereas, had he reacted angrily, we would have felt alienated.

These five lines of dialogue dramatize many of the important themes and elements
of the play, and they bring the disruptions in the vā between the play’s main characters
into focus. The idea of mana is a central tenet of the play and tied closely to the vā. As the
director of Mele Kanikau, and the researcher of this thesis, I recognize that I am
essentially applying a Samoan concept to Hawaiian characters, however I do this with the
understanding that Kneubuhl, as the afakasi Samoan playwright of Mele Kanikau,
brought his knowledge of mana and the va to his creation of the script. This understanding
is woven into the kie of the play and production, and is therefore the best way to discuss
the tenuous relationship between the play’s main characters. By criticizing Carl in front
of his cast and crew, Noa has disrupted the vā and has stolen some of Carl’s mana. At this
point Carl is prepared to dismiss Noa’s transgression in order to keep the peace, but later on in the play, he is not so willing to permit Noa’s continued disregard for his obligation to *teu le vā*.

These five lines contain aspects of Kneubuhl’s own internal cultural conflict with the lines in English, followed by Hawaiian and a brief, comedic mention of the Japanese language. If we consider Hawaiian representative of all Polynesian languages, and if we add to this the Japanese language that Kneubuhl learnt during the war, then these five lines incorporate some of the significant linguistic events of Kneubuhl’s life.

Embedded in the words “murder” and “correcting” are other significant themes, with Carl positioned as the ‘murderer’, and Noa ‘correcting’ his mistakes. Noa can be seen as representing justice and the law in his corrections. This prefigures the central crime of the play – the ‘murder’ of Carl’s son, which is represented later as the focus of the climactic argument. Here, Carl and the members of the pageant court are held to task for their rejection of young Hawaiian men – who could each be Carl’s son – a son who is eventually driven to taking his own life (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.155-160). In the ‘E nā kānaka’ scene, Carl murders the Hawaiian language, and later it is this language and Carl’s murdered son that come to represent the future of the Hawaiian culture and its people. Noa’s first words “This is where you read your speech”, are also significant. “This is where” is not only the marker of the place in the script, but the time and place of the pageant rehearsal itself in front of his people, the time of Noa’s arrival at the pageant, and finally the long-delayed reunion of Carl and Noa. The “where” refers to their location, not only at this point in the rehearsal but in the whole Waikiki world, as well as the performance location including my staging of the play in the Fale Pasifika, the set, and the theatre audience. The “read” is important, as we hear Carl stumble through his reading. Although he has seen Noa’s
script before, he still “murders” the Hawaiian words. As an accomplished descendant of the Hawaiian ali‘i, and a self-made businessman of high social standing in Hawaiian society, he is ‘shown up’ as incapable of learning or producing his own Hawaiian speech. He is reduced to reading and learning by rote the language that is essentially a part of his birthright but is unfamiliar enough to him that he must read the words from a piece of paper written by someone else. These lines also reveal some of the play’s metatheatre as Noa is cast as the director, instructing the actor “This is where you read your speech.” Then Carl, as the actor, replies “You want me to read it in Hawaiian?” and the director replies (perhaps sarcastically) “Well, it isn’t written in Japanese is it?,” and then Carl, as the actor, now playing the pageant king, reads his line, which the director then corrects. Even this small section of text reveals the metatheatrical play within a play device that underscores the playscript, as well as provides an opportunity for many other readings of these five lines and the play as a whole.

In rehearsal, I and my cast experimented with the reactions of the others on the stage to Carl’s Hawaiian with versions of the scene including the whole court laughing at him along with Noa’s musicians, to the court expressing anger at Noa on Carl’s behalf and the musicians being wary of Carl’s reaction. Each of these readings has different consequences, but the question that emerged was whether the court (his people) was on his side or not. I decided that the court was very much ‘for’ Carl and ‘against’ Noa. Played in this way, we can see that in Carl’s psyche, he knows that he is not alone and that other Hawaiians empathize with him. This is comforting and alarming at the same time. While he is not alone, it points towards a greater drama and loss that needs to be considered and confronted.
The scene was rendered more melodramatic by the onstage audience – the pageant court and musicians – who were forced to side with one of these contrasting characters. In essence, the interaction of Carl and Noa in these few lines splits the onstage audience into two camps. Every part of my production design worked to support this representation of ‘sides.’ This meant that at the level of costuming the Waikiki crowd wore only plastic and fake flowers in gaudy colours of red and yellow. The raised throne platform was also decorated in these colours. Meanwhile, Noa’s musicians wore aloha shirts patterned in grey and white and were barefoot.

The ‘E nā kānaka’ scene marks the point at which Noa begins to rewrite the established pageant to turn it into his own story, taking on a mimicry of authorship as he becomes the author and director of his own story, which culminates in his telling of the fabricated legend in Act Two. This legend eventually pushes Carl past the edge of his tolerance and destroys the vā between them altogether. From this focus scene we gain the impression that Noa, like the Author, is working things out as he goes along. He hands to Carl a speech that he has written himself sometime during the 24 hours since he was appointed to the pageant and he has made up a legend to tell in the pageant that represents his own story (just as the Author has made up Noa and Frances to tell the Georgina story). Even before Lydia confirms that Noa “made it all up” and that “there’s no legend like that” (p.160), we know that this is not a stock legend of the Hawaiian people and even his halau dancers are still unsure of the moves and are still being directed by Noa and Frances about how to perform it. Noa’s legend is very much a work that is both unfolding and disappearing before our eyes, and one of the first clues to this is when Noa hands Carl this speech.
In rehearsal, I experimented with varying degrees of emotional investment in the lines. I tried the scene with both characters angry, which meant that Noa won the battle for mana in these lines. We also tried having both characters quite patient, but because the scene depicts deliberate manipulation by Noa, he still won. Eventually, it was better to have Carl play the lines agreeably, as if he wants Noa’s new pageant to be a success, to appease the ill-feelings of Lydia (and by extension, all of the Waikiki court and dancers) and to teu le vā, easing the tension for all. This worked dramatically because it allowed Carl’s character to begin softly and to rise in his anger throughout his journey to realization by the end of the play. By the ending, Carl can be said to possess no mana, as he has been humiliated by Noa and then Lydia; but also much mana, as he has learned what it means to be a Hawaiian and to be true to that “from now on...every moment of every day for the rest of [his] life” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.172). At this realisation Noa, Frances and the other ghosts nod their approval.

**CONFLICTS IN THE **Kie**: REAL AND FAKE; HERO AND VILLAIN; CARL AND NOA**

Drama explicitly encourages the audience to choose sides, and at surface level the choices seem to be black and white – binary oppositions – like choosing between right and wrong, the good guy and the bad. Akin to this is the choice that we are seemingly asked to make between ‘real, authentic’ Hawaiian culture, and a fake, tourism-packaged, pageant version of Waikiki. When Noa shouts at Carl, “we’re the real Hawaiians,” the first reaction of the audience at this point in the play may be to agree with him. As well as Noa’s declaration of his own reality, the Author claims to be “the author – the real author – of this play.” Later, Carl accuses Noa of not being culturally authentic: “People like me – we’re the real Hawaiians...we don’t sit around, whining and bellyaching about some great
past we’ve lost. We work. We cope. The best way we can. In the real world. And we make it.” (p.148), to which Noa replies: “You don’t know what you’ve lost, Carl. And if you don’t know that, you’re not a Hawaiian” (p.148). Frances makes the ironic claim: “I am real, my Noa is real” (p.128). However, it becomes evident that Noa and Frances use the word “real” as a weapon in their arsenal to attack Carl and that Kneubuhl’s play is much more complicated than this. Instead of a clear cut set of binary absolutes, Kneubuhl presents us with ‘real’ characters who are actually fake – not only because of their status as creations in a work of fiction, but because they are ghosts - not even ‘real’ within the world of the play. Kneubuhl presents us with a hero and a villain who are seemingly interchangeable. Yes, we are supposed to empathize with the intense loss felt and expressed by Noa, and to applaud his efforts to rescue Carl from his own inauthenticity, but we cannot forget that Noa himself is, as Carl says, “a boor – a plain common honest-to-God boor!” (p.147) who is openly alcoholic, who violently beats his partner, and who becomes so carried away during his hula that he attempts to rape a member of the pageant crew. While we feel sorry for Noa because of the hopelessness of his cause, and we can see the sincerity of his love for Carl, he is also blatantly a violent and vengeful villain. On the other hand, Carl appears to be the quintessential “nice guy” who has hired an old friend in need of money to come and teach real hula to his plastic dancers. However, we cannot forget that Carl is the one who caused Noa’s exile in the first place, and that perhaps his invitation to Noa and his halau is actually driven by his recent sighting of Frances, his desire to see her and possibly, to win her back,背叛ing Noa all over again.

More than providing any answers, Kneubuhl’s Mele Kanikau is concerned with the problem of authenticity and bringing to the fore the question of what is real, and what is fake. In the ‘E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina’ scene, Carl’s attempt to read in Hawaiian represents
his failure as an ali‘i, just as all theatre is on some level a failure as representation, and all representation is fundamentally and by nature inauthentic. Within Mele Kanikau, the characters are trapped in representations of authenticity. The Author’s adept juggling of the plot and characters and his assurance to the audience that he is “more real” than the “real” author are perhaps the strongest assurance we have that, in fact, none of the characters are real or authentic, despite what they say, and particularly despite what they say about themselves. The six critical readings that follow utilize various dramatic and cultural lenses to show some the ways in which the play’s representations of different versions of authenticity might be understood.

**Six critical readings:**

**Melodrama**

Kneubuhl claims that his first requirement of theatre was that it be “theatrical” – “not that it be insightful, true to human ‘whatever’. My first gut demand is that it be theatrical” (Kneubuhl, 1997, p. 257). Alongside Kneubuhl’s desire for theatricality, this reading places Bond’s criteria for Melodrama: “Melodrama aims at the gut...let plays be as intelligent, witty, and thought-provoking as possible, but let them be something else first. Let them at least *try* to blow our heads off by making us laugh, cry, feel outraged, appalled, sexy, furious, and hopeful (preferably all at the same time), and we can think about them afterwards” (Bond, 1980, p. 15). Thus, Kneubuhl’s theatricality is at the heart of a melodramatic reading of Mele Kanikau. Theatre-maker Stephen Sondheim observes that while some define Melodrama “as villains twirling mustaches and lashing young virgins to railroad tracks ... something that is to be spoofed or funny”, he prefers to think of Melodrama as “theatre that is larger than life – in emotion, in subject and in complication.
of plot” (Sondheim, p. 3). Theorists agree on the nature of melodrama as “larger-than-life” and also on the importance of the roles of hero and villain. Bentley argues that “talent in melodramatic writing is most readily seen in the writer’s power to make his human villain seem superhuman and diabolical” (Bentley, 1966, p. 37). However, if we consider Mele Kanikau in terms of ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ roles, it is contestable which character is consistent with which type. If we assign the role of ‘hero’ to Carl, then he is the one who is bested by the villain but emerges victorious. At the play’s end, although Carl cannot be said to have gained any particularly obvious victory, it is certain that he has learnt a lesson since the story began. With Carl as the hero, Noa emerges as the play’s ‘villain’ and certainly, he commits some villainous acts, including stealing the heroine from the hero, behaving in a drunken and unacceptable way and committing deplorable acts of violence. Frances is the play’s ‘heroine’ – wilier, perhaps, than the hero – but she is not saved by the hero in the end and does not spend the play’s denouement in his arms. With these roles in place it is possible to follow the play in terms of these absolutes – the audience is meant to like Carl and to wish that he win the heroine by the story’s end. Similarly, when Noa has beaten Frances, it is easy to see Noa as the villain (albeit without the moustache twirling).

Brooks recognizes the importance of the final act of a Melodrama “in which the character of innocence and virtue is publicly recognized through its signs, and publicly celebrated and rewarded, while the villain is bodily expelled from the social realm: driven out, branded as evil, relegated to a space off-stage and outside the civilised world” (Brooks, 1994, p. 19). If we accept Brooks’ criteria for Melodrama, and place them alongside a Metatheatrical reading, there are two scenes in Mele Kanikau in which this trial occurs. Firstly, with the villain (Noa) during the pageant run in which Carl expels
him from the pageant court (for the second time), and then secondly with the villain (Carl) expelled from the pageant court at the play’s end.

According to melodramatic conventions, the good, but perhaps not very intelligent hero is deceived by the very clever and scheming villain to steal the damsel in distress, thus provoking the intense emotional reactions described by Bond. In a straightforward melodrama, the fates would intervene and the end would ensure the triumph of good over evil. However, *Mele Kanikau* is not this simple. Rather than fully conforming to a melodramatic structure, Kneubuhl uses the genre and plays with its stock characters to reveal deadly serious questions. Although its plot does appeal to the heightened emotions of the audience, the characters may not be so easily stereotyped, and it is very possible to cast Noa and Carl both as the hero and the villain of the piece.

The focus scene of this chapter marks the beginning of the villain’s evil machinations to destroy the hero. According to theatre-maker and lecturer, Frank Rahill, “at the hub of the typical melodrama was the villain, at his best, a superman of crime, tireless in iniquity, implacable in vengeance, inexhaustible in evil resource. Around this monster’s treasonable ambitions, his sinful loves, his base grudges, the plot revolved” (1967, p. 207). By the end of the play, in its simplest melodramatic reading, the hero has cast out the villain, and despite the fact that he failed to win back the heroine, he could be set to live happily ever after. However, the twist occurs, the ghosts are revealed, and Carl, as our hero, realises that the villain wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, the ‘villain’ turns out to be his own limited view of himself and his world, for as Gunning argues, underpinning Melodrama is a “determination to unearth the truth” (Gunning, 1994, p. 55).

Both of the potential heroes work through their own crises and difficulties, and both of their journeys involve endurance, sacrifice, and bravery. Melodrama also requires
a central crime. In this case, the ‘stealing’ of the damsel by the villain (in this reading, Noa) has occurred before the play begins and what we witness are the long-term repercussions of this crime. Noa (the villain) has been ostracized from his society and banished by Carl (the hero). Frances (the heroine/damsel) has also been an exile over the past years and there are implications that she was hoodwinked into going with Noa. In the parallel storyline, the Author mentions “native magic herbs” when he asks the question “why did she go off like that?” (p.111-112), but has no definitive answer regarding Frances/Georgina’s desertion of her place in society.

In another reading, the role of the hero becomes less clear because the central crime of Mele Kanikau is, of course, the murder of Carl’s son. In essence, the trial for this crime occurs in the presence of the aptly named pageant ‘court,’ and it is Carl who is ultimately found to be guilty, despite his vehement protestations.

Thus, it is also possible to view Noa as the hero. Gunning argues that the role of melodramatic heroes is to “strive to pull things into the light of day, to unearth the truth, even if this requires violence, the pressure applied to the surface of reality which yields its true meaning, like a prisoner under interrogation” (1994, p. 54). Noa certainly can be read as the hero who “pulls things into the light of day”. In the terms of the melodrama definition, Noa is fearless and unafraid of defying societal conventions or expectations in his quest “to unearth the truth”. He can also be read as the poor boy who has fallen in love with the rich lady and won her from the rich man – another popular trope in melodrama. Continuing in this reading of Noa as hero, in the past he has also had his identity and livelihood stripped from him in a situation over which he seemed to have little control. Carl, the powerful villain, stripped Noa of his lowly position in society and rendered him an outcast. By his good fortune (the only stroke of luck) the beautiful heroine, seeing the
good in him and the evil in the powerful villain, chose to forsake her old life of riches and live as an outcast with him. In the role of the hero, Noa has also ‘rescued’ Frances, the heroine, from a life of misery in the arms of Carl, the villain.

As Bond says, “Melodrama is difficult to define precisely, but most authorities seem to agree that it needs a larger-than-life story-line, simply told; sensational and spectacular action; a bit of music” (Bond, 1980, p. 16). It is arguable that Mele Kanikau has several larger-than-life storylines including ghosts, spirits, figures from high society and a legendary cast of characters from Hawai‘i’s mythical past. Each of these storylines, coupled with the music and dance essential to the play, combine to make a strong case for the melodramatic reading of Mele Kanikau, in which Kneubuhl twists the conventions of melodrama to his own ends.

Kneubuhl’s transnational literary knowledge ensures that it is possible to make links between each of the readings here as they intertwine, deepening the complexity of the weaving of the kie strands. Kirby argues that “popular melodrama can...be a weapon for social criticism” and furthermore that “Melodrama is material available to everyone, its devices, characters and situations instantly known, implanted by the culture in the psyche of each of its members” (Kirby, 1980, p. xiv). This idea of a culturally located form of social criticism might lead towards a reading of Mele Kanikau through the lens of cultural crisis, however the weaving of the kie instead picks up the strands of a Psychodramatic reading.

There are many links between Melodrama and Psychodrama. Brooks alerts us to the fact that “Melodrama constantly reminds us of the psychoanalytic concept of ‘acting out’: the use of the body itself, its actions, gestures, its sites of irritation and excitation, to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation” and that
“psychoanalysis is a kind of modern melodrama” (1994, p. 19). Hence, the next reading is of *Mele Kanikau* as a Psychodrama.

**Psychological Drama**

Moreno, widely recognized as the founder of psychodrama, argues that “Psychodrama can be defined... as the science which explores the “truth” by dramatic methods” (Moreno, 1972, p. 12). As a psychological drama, the events of *Mele Kanikau* are occurring inside Carl’s head. This reading supposes that the play functions as a release for his feelings of guilt and remorse over what he did and what he has lost. The play leads to his acknowledgment that he is living a parody of what it is to be Hawaiian and that his treatment of Noa in the past has been grossly unjust. In this way, the play functions as his psychological journey towards learning what it is to be Hawaiian and, on an existentialist level, to be himself. The reading of *Mele Kanikau* as a psychological drama also considers the personal story of loss, in which in the past Carl has been betrayed by his best friend who once ran away with his betrothed, causing him to lose the love of his life. Carl’s seeking out of Noa was prompted by his chance sighting of Frances waiting for a bus. As he confesses this to her, he also confesses that he “just wanted to see [her] again” (p.145). Carl’s love for Frances has endured over their years apart, and his failure to understand why she left him for Noa still haunts him. In his desire to see Frances again, Carl must face Noa and the very mixed feelings he has about their past.

In the context of the psychodrama, Carl summons Noa to the pageant in the full knowledge that Noa will exact his revenge. Carl seeks both the purgation that Noa’s return will bring, and the pain of that reunion. Noa has effectively been banned from Honolulu society for twenty years and he intends to make Carl suffer. He stops the pageant hula
and demands that the dancers and entire court witness Carl humiliating himself. It is cruel, but Carl has brought this upon himself through his specific selection of Noa as the Kumu Hula. Frances recognizes that there were other kumu hula (p.110) that Carl could have potentially hired. If the play is the enactment of the psychological drama of Carl, then Carl himself willingly confronts the truth of what he has put Noa through. He endeavours to make amends by having Noa return the suffering in one of the worst ways that Carl can envisage – to be shamed in front of all the people who work for him and his fellow ali‘i.

Tompkins, drawing on the influences of Homi Bhaba and Judith Butler argues that “psychoanalysis can then, act as an ideal theoretical tool for analysing the multipositioned subject and multiplicitous identities that are integral to contemporary postcolonial, feminist, and queer theories, theories that are predicated on shifting, othered, and/or multiple senses of self” (Tompkins, 1997, p. 503). In a psychodramatic reading, the ‘character’ of the Author might be read as an analyst, whom Kneubuhl has extracted from the immediate drama to dramatize these “multiple senses of self”. He uses the Author to stage simultaneously, in a separate reality yet in the same physical forum, the drama of a psychoanalysis in which Carl’s mind, his motives, his hidden desires, his deepest fears (the loss of love above all else) are subjected to gentle but relentless probing. The Author deconstructs, but he also reconstructs in the sense of creating a world of uncannily parallel characters, or “mulitplicitous identities”, manifested as Georgina, the Samoan man and himself.

Certainly for Carl, Moreno’s belief that psychodrama explores “truth” by dramatic methods” (Moreno, 1972, p. 12), is true. The moment of personal truth inherent in this
reading is centred on the past he shares with Noa and Frances, the moment at which they betrayed him and his revenge in casting them out of society.

Morena also claims that “the psychodramatic method uses mainly five instruments – the stage, the subject or patient, the director, the staff of therapeutic aides or auxiliary egos, and the audience” (Moreno, 1972, p. a) In this reading, Noa not only takes over as the director, but also stands in as the analyst, who, through the stage and some auxiliary egos in the form of his halau, exposes the raw wound of Carl’s trauma. Carl has actively sought out his own nemesis in the name of an old love and this masochistic nostalgia leads to pain for him. In terms of the psychological drama, this is the moment at which Carl must consciously confront his own inadequacies as well as deal with the fact that Noa is the figure who must come back to point them out to him.

From the opening lines of the play the central storyline, and its echoes in the other layers of the plot, supports a reading of Mele Kanikau as Carl’s psychological drama. From the moment, the Author steps onto the stage and denounces the playwright’s and his own authenticity, the audience is firmly in the realm of the psyche. The Author is himself a ghost, created to call forth the other voices of Carl’s dead. Through the course of the play, Carl makes an immense psychological journey. He invites in the ‘ghosts’ that have haunted his past in the hope of making some sort of reconciliation with them. He says to Frances “I saw you the other day…I wanted to see you again…somehow” (p.145). In this way, he conjures them to arrive at his pageant, the addition of the word “somehow” adding to the idea that their presence is not a natural occurrence, and that he was prepared to use any means to see her. He admits that he is the one who convinced the committee to hire Noa for “his integrity,” but the truth is closer to what he tells Frances. Carl seeks to confront these people from his past who had hurt him badly and whom he had hurt badly.
in return. Simultaneously though, the ghosts seem to have their own agenda in visiting Carl. They have come from the “murmuring darkness” of Carl’s unconscious mind to tell him that they love him, and to remind him of the rich cultural heritage to which he has a responsibility. It takes a great deal of pushing on the part of Noa and Frances for Carl to reach his mental breaking point. When he is finally pushed past his tolerance, Noa says to Frances “we have done what we came to do” (p.162) thus ending the work of the psychodrama, and pushing Carl, as the analysand, into the act of healing himself.

Carl’s internal realization eventually comes at great cost. The legend of Kahikiloa and Kea, as told by Noa plays a significant role in the drama of Carl’s psyche. It is through this legend that Carl becomes the audience, shown his own role in the conflict that occurred between himself and Frances and Noa. Carl is driven inexorably to the final Act, where he must confront Lydia, denounce the pageant, and begin to take up the mantle of authenticity left to him by the ghosts from his past. He must abandon his bad faith existence and seek to live a more authentic life. As Moreno argues, “one of the most important achievements of psychodramatic theory is the development of the idea of catharsis” (1972, p. 13). The psychodrama of the play serves to bring Carl from his complacent, Waikiki, tourist-centred existence to the realization of the awesome truth about himself and what it is to be a ‘real’ Hawaiian.

In a Psychodramatic reading, the director has three functions “producer, therapist and analyst” (Moreno, 1972, p. c). This multiplicity of roles and story make a transition from Psychological Drama to Metatheatre very possible, however, the kie now picks up the strands of Kneubuhl’s autobiography, because, as Di Gaetani argues, “being able to expose and explore psychological problems enables both the playwright and the audience
to understand better, and knowledge and power have a legendary attraction which can certainly become dramatic” (Di Gaetani, 2008, p.7).

**Autobiographical Drama**

Canadian theatre scholar, Sherrill Grace argues that “Auto/Biographies satisfy our desire for story at the same time as they promise to give us truths (if not Truth), to provide meaning, identity, and possibly even order in an otherwise incoherent, arbitrary, and often violent world” (2006, p. 14). From the moment the Author declares at the outset of the play that he has just as much right as the actual playwright to make the claim “I am John Kneubuhl” and declares his half-caste status: “He’s part Samoan; I’m part Hawaiian” (p.101) the audience is aware that we are in or near the territory of autobiography. From these opening lines of the play, the audience is very aware of Kneubuhl’s presence in the script. The Author claims that he has “as much right as he to say that I am the author – the real author – of this play, even to use his name as mine...Here and now I create him, and in that creation, create myself” (p.100). These notions of the Author as a visible part of the stage play, coupled with Existentialist ideas about art and creation permeate Kneubuhl’s dramatic works, and it is easy to see elements of autobiography in not only *Think of a Garden*, which most scholars and colleagues agree is autobiographical in content, but in other works too, including *Mele Kanikau*.

Leroux argues that “the three forms of autobiographical drama, as defined by Patrice Pavis, are the life story, the confessional play and the identity play” (2006, p. 109). It is possible to read *Mele Kanikau* as all three. Kneubuhl says that “in kanikau, you see how the playwright says, ‘This is the autobiographical material and this is what I have done to it’ – from Samoan autobiographical material – to make a Hawaiian play”
(Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1990, p. 55). In the afterword to the play, Jackie Pualani Johnson observes this play is a “love song to Dotsy,” Kneubuhl’s wife and lifelong friend. The play asks many of Kneubuhl’s own questions – ‘why did she go off like that?’ The Author’s position appropriating Kneubuhl’s name and story as his own causes us to make these links between what has happened in Kneubuhl’s real life and love and the Georgina story, the Frances and Noa story and the Kahikiloa and Kea ‘myth.’ In this case, Kneubuhl can, to some extent, be seen as the outsider who came into Hawaiian society and stole a haole bride. To some extent, he is the “ignorant savage” that she went off with to live in the bush.

Kneubuhl’s marriage to Dotsy was not without complications. His half-caste status meant that it was illegal for him to marry a white woman in some American States at that time. This personal knowledge of cultural conflict may have affected his writing of the characters of Noa and Frances. As mentioned above, Victoria Kneubuhl maintains that the character of Noa is much more like her uncle John than the afakasi boy David in *Think of a Garden* which she says is assumed to be “a straight autobiographical play” (Kneubuhl in Johnston, 1997, p.257).

Kneubuhl said adamantly on several occasions “90% of the damage that has been done to Polynesians has been done by Polynesians themselves. And if we have lost our culture, we are to blame, not silly haolies or whatever” (Kneubuhl, in Vought, 1994, p.205). He strongly urged young Polynesians to pay more attention to the declining state of their cultures. Kneubuhl’s plays are a plea to the peoples of Polynesia to consider what it means to be the progeny of such a rich culture and to be cognizant of the choices impelling their evolution. These issues are, of course, not distinctive to the Polynesians. They are universalized by the reality that every individual, on the personal and societal level, must decide who will determine their fate (Vought, 1994, p. 204). Kneubuhl’s plays
are driven by an ongoing search for social and cultural identity, at the heart of which we can see the influence of his two cultures. Johnson says, “Kneubuhl’s own early experiences brought him face to face with alienation from his dual heritages, an alienation that haunted him throughout his life and became the grist for his Hawaiian plays” (Johnson, 1997, p.260). Our scene sees those two cultures come into conflict. On the one hand, Noa represents Kneubuhl. He is the authentic artist, struggling to live an authentic life. He is culturally literate and savvy – able to script stories in Polynesian languages. His expertise is accepted and sometimes revered. However, Kneubuhl is also Carl. He stands outside his own culture at times, despite his high-ranking status. To some extent, Kneubuhl is also Frances: an outsider with insider knowledge that somehow licences her/him to comment on the authenticity of the other players. Frances criticises the Hawaiian ali’i system just as Kneubuhl does. Kneubuhl’s dual heritage is present in the scene in its use of the English and the Polynesian. Many of the conflicting aspects of Kneubuhl’s life are brought to the fore in ‘E nā kānaka.’

In performance, in an autobiographical sense, the cast were aware that they were performing each night for people who actually knew John Kneubuhl and would be looking for him within their text and action. They were aware that “there is something fundamental to the life and work of an actor or playwright that foregrounds the performance of living and thereby complicates the biographical re-creation of that life” (Grace, 2006, p. 14). This meant that they had the feeling of responsibility to do justice not only to the creative vision of the performance, but also to the author behind it. The cast were very aware in this scene that they were drawing attention to the dualism that informed most of Kneubuhl’s work. Kneubuhl talks about the capacity for theatre to “awaken audiences” and the particular need for Polynesians to be alert to the state of their
cultures and to cultivate a strong understanding of their own identities. In this scene, we see part of the internal struggle that Kneubuhl dealt with between his own two cultures, and an autobiographical drama about a playwright who always sought to represent both of his cultures on the stage.

Most pertinent in an autobiographical reading of the play is Kneubuhl’s own crisis of authenticity and his rejection of the bad faith existence he had as a screen-writer in Hollywood. In the Introduction, I cited Kneubuhl’s rejection of his Hollywood years:

for thirty years of my life, I lived as a half-person, my haole half, twenty of them in Hollywood where I assumed a counterfeit voice, denying my own. So split, so denying my total self, so denying the reality that was me, I could no longer maintain the charade…and I began for the first time to piece my real self together (Kneubuhl, n.d., “playwriting lecture notes”).

I argued that this was Kneubuhl reclaiming his “indigenous artistic roots” (p. 9), and this is true, however this exodus was also a rejection of the Hollywood lifestyle he had been living and an attempt to live more authentically.

The incident that provoked this return to American Samoa was a psychotic, suicidal episode:

what was vivid was a big carving knife, a butcher knife on the dining room table which I could see from the corner of the kitchen, where I had sort of zonked out, and between me and the knife, the kitchen floor had turned to water, and I knew if I left that corner I would drown. And the next morning, when a friend going by, seven, seven-thirty in the morning, came by and knocked at the door and couldn’t see me anywhere, for some reason he looked from out the French doors, outside the dining room, he looked under the door and under the dining room table and
he saw me in the corner of the kitchen, and he pushed open the French doors and came in and stayed with me all day until Dotsy got home that evening (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Only after many years of psychoanalysis was Kneubuhl able to understand what had happened.

It isn’t just a pursuit of a peculiar kind of thing called mental health, which is nonexistent…but in a very real, existential way, what it all added up to was the confirming of something which I was neurotically manifesting, like a little kid in a corner, kicking and screaming, wanting his own way...what I was really screaming for was that I wanted to be free (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989).

Di Gaetani argues that “As Freud said, neurosis is the human condition, and addressing problems of neurosis on the contemporary stage becomes a way of addressing the human condition” (Di Gaetani, 2008, p. 185), so through dramatizing aspects of his life and in his rejection of Hollywood and the accompanying lifestyle, Kneubuhl rejects the Existentialist concept of bad faith. In Hollywood, he claims to have led a contrived life, inauthentic in essence as “half a person...denying [his] total self.” He rejected this by returning to American Samoa. “I woke up one morning and said, this is nonsense, why am I doing this, and I’ve been hemmed in for the last twenty years by doing things that I don’t really want to do” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). Therefore, his return to Polynesia was also a search for his authentic self. While it is true that reclamation of his native identity, as a Polynesian was an important cultural move for Kneubuhl, it was equally important to understand what he turned his back on, as a Samoan playwright. Like Kneubuhl, Noa refuses to embrace a ‘fake’ existence and his best advice to Carl is to leave the Waikiki world and to learn to be – not only Hawaiian – but also himself.
Grace’s claim that autobiographical theatre “represents a crucial site for inscribing and preserving cultural memory” (Grace, 2006, p. 15) lends itself well as a way of adding the strands of the next reading. She also argues that:

at their best, auto/biographical plays are profoundly philosophical; they probe and weigh what it means to claim a personal or national identity...to make ethical choices that affect, or have affected the actual lives of other real people and they challenge the social construction of identity by staging processes of identity formation that invite audiences to see themselves and others as able to recreate identity and to assert personal agency.

Grace, 2006, p.15

These ideas of autobiography as a means of “inscribing and preserving cultural memory” combined with the ability to “recreate identity and to assert personal agency”.

**Cultural Crisis Drama**

Sherrill Grace argues that “to speak of culture without story is a contradiction. It is through story that we isolate facts, build histories, and contextualise events; it is through story that we strive to make sense of experience, discover what we accept as truths, and come to know ourselves and others” (Grace, 2006, p. 17). Throughout the *Mele Kanikau* story, cultural crisis pervades the central themes, deeply tied to the undercurrents of loss that are evoked, from Noa’s mourning of the absent birds to the Author’s on-going lament for Georgina and the loss of her child. Wendt reminds us “our dead are woven into our souls, like the hypnotic music of bone flutes. We can never escape them” (Wendt, 1972) and the presence of the ghosts and the Polynesian notions of the continual presence of the dead that hover throughout the playscript and performance are all rife with the sense
of cultural crisis. In this crisis, the audience must again take sides – either we are with Lydia and the pageant court, “trapped in their make-believe world,” or we are with Carl, attempting to discover and recover what has been lost. The Hawaiian culture comes to be represented by Carl’s son who is tragically driven to kill himself after being cast out by his own people.

In the Introduction I argued that Kneubuhl presents cultures in crisis at risk not only from the impact of colonization, but threats and challenges to Polynesian ways of being, in the forms of global commodification, the burgeoning demands of tourism, and the much more critical, and much more subtle threat from within – Polynesian people themselves.

Focusing on cultural crisis in the context of post-colonial Polynesia, it is useful to consider Schechner’s argument that:

To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religion, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonized (Schechner, 2006, p. 282).

Schechner argues that colonialism executes control through the devaluing of the indigenous culture and the privileging of the language of the colonizer. Each of the two aspects he describes is addressed in *Mele Kanikau*, where the core of Schechner’s statement is brought to the fore in the confrontation between Lydia and Frances. Frances finally loses her composure when Lydia openly attacks Noa in her angry tirade to Carl, accusing Noa, saying: “he fires the dancers, like this was his pageant. He’s filthy, and he’s immoral, and he’s a drunken man...” (p.128). At this, Frances commences her own attack
on Lydia. As the play’s only haole character, Frances’ position is problematic. She is at once insider – she speaks and understands Hawaiian olelo, she lives in a traditional Hawaiian settlement and is competent in helping Noa run their halau, but outsider – she is haole, and may never truly belong to the culture she has adopted. In her attack, she denounces Lydia and the ali‘i from what seems to be the colonizers’ point of view according to Schechner, saying, “Once you were nothing. All of you. Until my people came...we taught you how to read, we taught you how to live at a time when you would have been trampled under by other haole” (p. 128). Frances enforces what Schechner says regarding the control of a people’s self-definition. She says “once you were nothing...until my people came,” thereby supporting this view of the colonizer who disregards the value indigenous peoples have of their own self-hood and imposes their own beliefs “you were nothing. All of you.” However, in the next moment Frances criticizes Lydia, and the ali‘i for being arrogant and Lydia herself for her inability to speak Hawaiian: “The one thing we didn’t need to teach you was arrogance. You needed no lessons in that! The Hawaiian ali‘i! And, my God, you can’t even speak your own language” (p.128). Schechner argues that the two aspects of this process of colonialism involve “the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture... and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonized.” While in this speech we can see that Frances’ devaluing of culture does occur – “you were nothing...until my people came” – in the same breath she seems to switch sides, indicating that as a member of the Hawaiian ali‘i, it is abhorrent that Lydia cannot speak Hawaiian: “my God, you can’t even speak your own language!” (p. 128). In her speech, Frances exhibits her characteristics as insider and outsider, as colonizer, and one who has adopted the culture of the colonized. She says, in Hawaiian “Ma mua, ‘o ‘oe ka mea ‘ole loa. Ua lilo ko‘u mau kupuna ia ‘oe i ke ali‘i” (p.128). Ironically, these words translate to “Once you
were nothing. My ancestors made you ali’i” as in this Kneubuhl uses Hawaiian ‘ōlelo to help represent the paradox that is Frances – she speaks the ideas of the colonizer in the language of the colonized, inverting one of the most powerful tools of colonization. Frances’ speech is indicative of the complexity of the conflict and cultural crisis in Hawai’i as Kneubuhl sees it.

However, I have also alluded to the crisis of culture generated from within. It is not insignificant that in the ‘E nā kānaka’ scene, the line that Carl first ‘murders’ is the one that translates as “People of the land.” Sinavaiana-Gabbard argues that “Kneubuhl’s plays thus interrogate the notion of ‘cultural identity’ and more generally, how theatre can work as a site of revelation in which problems of identity or race can be performed, challenged, re-inscribed and/or symbolically reconciled” (2000, p. 211). One of the most provocative and controversial aspects of Mele Kanikau is its perceived criticism of the Hawaiian people. Within ‘E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina’, the crisis of the dying language and cultural identity of the Hawaiian people is exposed and Carl, as the chosen representative of the people of the land, is commanded to speak Hawaiian.

In ‘E nā kānaka’, Noa deliberately reacts against what Schechner terms the “conscious elevation of the language of the colonized” and draws our attention to the loss of Hawaiian culture as represented in its language. The characters of Noa and the Author bring this loss to the surface throughout the play. This is particularly apparent when the Author says, in the closing speech of Act II “‘What flew away out of our lives?’ I could think only of …o’o…mamo...i’iwi...o’u...A mele kanikau of birds names” (p. 164) in an echo of Noa’s earlier lines in his lament for the extinct, native Hawaiian birds “How sad that sounds, just saying their names. O’o, mamo, i’iwi, o’u ...a mele kanikau of birds names” (p.114). The birds are one symbol of the Hawaiian culture that has been lost. Frances
suggests, their “little lives” have gone “to make feather capes and helmets for the ali‘i” (p.115), thus cementing her own condemnation of the ali‘i and laying the blame for the loss of Hawaiian culture at their feet.

A concern for the cheapening of culture for the sake of a tourist market is also particularly present in Kneubuhl’s plays – Frances criticizes Lydia for “this cheap – this pathetic – pageant” (p.128). Albert Wendt, writing in the 1972 in his essay Towards a New Oceania makes the comment that “there is no state of cultural purity” and fears that:

The colonisers prescribed for us the roles of domestic animal, amoral phallus, the lackey, the comic and lazy and happy-go-lucky fuzzy-haired boy, and the well-behaved colonised. Some of our own people are trying to do the same to us, to turn us into servile creatures they can exploit easily. We must not consent to our own abasement (Wendt, 1972, pp. 12-13).

Like Wendt, Noa argues against accepting the inauthentic role prescribed for the Waikiki pageant king by the touristical demands of his patrons. Instead, Noa calls for the stand against the abasement of the Hawaiian people.

The recurring question of dead or murdered children is important and there are four dead children that appear in the playscript. The opening of each Act includes references to the story of a dead child. In Act I, we hear that “Maile’s sister Helen is getting a scrape job” (p.101), reported in the opening conversations of the pageant dancers. At the beginning of Act II, the halau discuss the child of Frances and Noa. Pokipala shares his secret that “one time, the kumu get hapai” (p.140) and Malia exclaims, “the kumu get hapai and Frances had the baby?” (p.140), but they all mourn that now that baby is “make.” This parallel of dead babies across the acts is echoed in the parallel between the dead children of Carl and Georgina. As Kneubuhl says in an earlier, unpublished draft of
Mele Kanikau: “Repetitions. Variations. Correspondences. Co-relationships. That’s all this Second Act is about” (Kneubuhl, n.d.). In the Author’s story, Georgina takes a knife in the forest and sharpens a branch from an ohi’a tree, just as Carl’s son “sharpened a short stake from a small branch of a koa tree” in order to “stab...the hurt out of his broken heart” (p.160). In Noa’s trial of the pageant court, the crisis of cultural loss embodied in the recurring notion of the dead child, is more statistical than real. Lokalia, as a teacher is accused of “killing” a little Hawaiian boy “because he kept speaking Hawaiian in class” (p.156); Arthur (Ginger Lei in my production) is accused of not allowing the boy to attend Kamehameha School; Clement (Keoki in my production) as a councilman is accused of forcing “beautiful Hawaiians” to collect garbage. As Noa’s tirade continues, the audience becomes aware of the real crisis – that many indigenous young Hawaiian people have been and are being excluded from education and employment in their own country because of their perceived Hawaiian-ness. This is a large part of the Hawaiian cultural crisis that Kneubuhl depicts in 1975. While this crisis is poignant to the play, Mele Kanikau also highlights a cultural crisis relevant to the time of my production in Aotearoa in 2013. The play warns us, just as Noa warns Carl, that the indigenous cultures of Polynesia are at risk of being lost in a Pacific increasingly colonized, culturally and economically, by global powers and forces. We must hold tight to and cherish our Polynesian languages, knowledge and cultural practices because we are e nā kānaka o kā ʻāina. We, along with Carl and the court, are made to feel a sense of personal responsibility and grief for the lost child and the cultural crisis he represents. Carl and his colleagues (and we, by implication) are pronounced guilty of the murder – as much as Carl, in reading the line in Hawaiian, “murders every word.”
Metatheatrical Drama

In *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant*, Kneubuhl explicitly represents representation. While all theatre is an act of representation, metatheatre is evident when the nature of the act of representation is woven into the drama in an explicit way “constructing play texts that contain within the perimeter of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance, in which actors appear as actors who play an additional role” (Fisher and Greiner, 2007, p. xi).

Sinavaiana-Gabbard argues that *Mele Kanikau* is “a meta-narrative about the nature of the creative process itself” (2000, p. 218) and in the ‘E nā kānaka’ scene, there is clear evidence of this meta-narrative. Noa assumes the double role of a character within Kneubuhl’s play, and the hired director and kumu hula of the “Jubilee Festival pageant” within the play, and Carl is both on the board of this pageant, as well as its mo’i, an actor receiving direction. When Noa says to Carl “This is where you read your speech,” he steps into his dual role in the meta-narrative and directs “the creative process itself”.

In her comment, Sinavaiana-Gabbard also acknowledges the role of the trilogy articulated by Kneubuhl as the “artist and his search.” Its position in the trilogy, between *Think of a Garden* and *A Play: A Play*, is significant in Kneubuhl’s developing thoughts about playwriting and the nature of creation. In *Mele Kanikau*, the ‘Author’ character purports to be working himself out. He philosophizes on the role of the artist until he comes to the point where he realizes that a play is a conscious working-out of its playwright, and that it is this act that is important: “Poets do not search for final meaning; we act. We celebrate…Poets can only, when they reach out beyond words, touch what is real, what is near, and they are touched by that nearness” (p.165). Each of the three storylines of the play substantiate what Brustein says about the self-conscious narration
in metatheatre: “The concern with metafiction and metahistory involves an extreme self-consciousness about narration, in which narrators often intervene and comment on their stories, or on the composition of their stories, or on how their stories relate to other stories” (Brustein, 1964, p. 245). In each case, some version of the author reveals himself to and attempts to enter a dialogue with the audience. In Kneubuhl’s earlier draft of *Mele Kanikau*, the Author confesses to the audience at the end of the first act after Noa’s possession:

I have a confession to make. And I think I should make it now, in case I may have been misunderstood and, during the intermission, that misunderstanding grows. The confession is this: vulgarity of any kind appals me, as does any form of cruelty...why did I write that last scene?

Kneubuhl, n.d.

Yet, this earlier version does not have the answers either, and at the beginning of the second act, the draft Author admits “this Second Act doesn’t advance us any closer to an answer. It simply repeats the First Act, asking the same question” (Kneubuhl, n.d.). The Author in the final version of the play is unapologetic, maintaining the balance of his stories as he sees fit. Every now and then, he allows us to peek behind the curtain - “Eech! I mean that Samoan man” - to view the play as complex artifice.

The Author is the narrator who intervenes and comments on his own story and how his story relates to the other stories of the play. However, from the first moments of the play, the Author makes himself known to the audience as more than the story’s narrator, he says not only that “I am John Kneubuhl”, but perhaps more significantly that “I am the play.” In the metatheatre of the play the Author then makes another bold claim to which he returns at the play’s end, that he is, in fact, more real than Kneubuhl, and that
“the poet cannot exist without the poem.” He then seems to call into existence all of the other characters and stories of the play, conjuring them in order to contemplate them himself as much as for the entertainment of the audience. In Mele Kanikau, at times, the Author deliberately pulls the rug from under our feet. At the end of Act I, after shocking the audience with what appears to be the driving plot for Frances and Noa’s story, he declares “and all that about Georgina...? Well, none of it is true. I made those up” (p.136). This adds to our sense of the power of the playwright and his creation in the world of metatheatre.

As well as the Author’s story, we must also consider the two types of fiction that exist within its plot. Mele Kanikau contains both a legend and a pageant. The words “A Pageant” form half of the play’s well-balanced title. ‘Pageant’ is variously defined as this entry from Dictionary.com demonstrates:

“1. an elaborate public spectacle illustrative of the history of a place, institution, or the like, often given in dramatic form or as a procession of colorful floats.
2. a costumed procession, masque, allegorical tableau, or the like forming part of public or social festivities.
3. a show or exhibition, especially one consisting of a succession of participants or events: a beauty pageant.
4. something comparable to a procession in colorful variety, splendor, or grandeur: the pageant of Renaissance history.
5. a pretentious display or show that conceals a lack of real importance or meaning.” (Pageant, n.d.)
If we consider the ‘E nā kānaka’ scene in particular, the action works to show Carl his own story on stage. The later telling of the legend might be linked to Shakespearean metatheatre – both *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* include the metatheatrical ‘play-within-a-play’ device and Carl’s guilt is revealed to him, as in *Hamlet*, through the putting on of the play within the play. In *Hamlet*, the title character gives the players “a dozen or so lines” to insert into the play, just as Noa writes the speech for Carl. We recognize from this that the idea of inserting a text in order to trigger guilt has a very specific Shakespearean precedent. However, the most telling link to Shakespearean metatheatre will be made in the final reading of the play as a palimpsest of *The Tempest* where the whole action of the play is staged by a master magician to expose the guilt of the inauthentic duke.

The notion of the play within the play is evident as Noa rewrites and directs Carl’s new pageant. In this case the pageant functions as “an elaborate public spectacle illustrative of the history of a place, institution, or the like” as well as fulfils Noa’s desire to debunk the pageant and Carl himself as “a pretentious display or show that conceals a lack of real importance or meaning.” Noa has Carl in his power and uses the play to humiliate him.

It is likewise possible to view *Mele Kanikau* in the light of Post-Colonial Metatheatre. Tompkins argues that post-colonial theatre is a form of “spectacular resistance” to colonialism. She defines three categories of Post-Colonial Metatheatre; counter-discursive metatheatre, which resists by re-writing and re-performing classical texts; allegorical metatheatre, which creates a split and multiplied audience gaze; and mimicking metatheatre, in which there is menace in the double-edged mimick. Thus, the audience partipates in the act of spectacular resistance by witnessing (twice) the theatrical
act that is dislocated, re-written, split and multiplied. In Post-Colonial Metatheatre, as with Brecht’s Modernism, and the practice of Fale Aitu, the “audience is implicated in the metatheatre” (Tompkins, 1995, p. 46). As Leach argues of Brecht’s theatre: “Th[e] spectator has been drawn into the productive process of the theatre. His critical response, his aesthetic judgement has been brought into play decisively, so that the play has, in a sense, produced him, just as he has produced the play” (Leach, 2004, p. 120). These creative and critical understandings of metatheatre are brought into play from the moment the Author makes the claim to his “dear friends” (the audience) that he has “as much right as he to say that I am the author – the real author – of this play, even to use his name as mine...Here and now I create him, and in that creation, create myself” (p.100).

**Palimpsest**

Just as “the play within the play is often used by playwrights to reveal the workings of dramatic irony and the very nature of drama” (Beus, 2007, p. 15), the interpretation of *Mele Kanikau* as a palimpsest creates a different kind of double reading. Metatheatre offers “the framing of the inner play [which] exposes the existence of the author from within and... gestures towards the actual author at work” (Beus, 2007, p. 19), while palimpsest assumes that “any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms; any writing is rewriting; and literature is always in the second degree” (Prince, 1997, p. ix). This strand of the *kie* offers a reading of *Mele Kanikau* as a palimpsest of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Kneubuhl had a childhood connection to Shakespeare. The first book he remembered reading was *The Merchant of Venice* and he
claimed that his parents had a well-stocked classical library. It is sensible to assume then, that Kneubuhl was familiar with *The Tempest*.

The lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that precede the critical discussion in this chapter speak of an “insubstantial pageant” and “such stuff as dreams are made on.” These phrases, and others, are directly applicable to *Mele Kanikau*. If we read Kneubuhl’s play as a palimpsest of *The Tempest*, many parallels are immediately apparent. Noa is Prospero. After many years in exile, and imbued with supernatural powers, he draws in his enemy in order to exact his revenge. This revenge is necessary because his mana was stolen from him. He re-writes the story established by others (in Prospero’s case it is his brother’s usurpation that he wishes to ‘re-write’) in order to script his own. He causes his adversary to face some of his deepest fears and humiliates him – exacting a promise for better conduct in the future. He is the outcast Bohemian artist figure who disregards the rules of society. The stage (island), which provides the setting for his revenge, is significant and symbolic. Prospero, the sorcerer, and Noa, the ghost, are simultaneously the most and the least authentic characters in their own dramas.

Both *The Tempest* and *Mele Kanikau* have strong retrospective qualities in the “dark backward and abyss of time” (I: ii: 50). Each seeks to redress mistakes of the past and functions as a drama of revenge. In the back-story of *The Tempest*, his younger brother Antonio, who is now the King of Naples, has usurped Prospero. Prospero claims that he was “so reputed/ In dignity, and for the liberal arts, /Without a parallel” (I: ii: 72-74) but admits that he neglected his “worldly ends” (I: ii: 89). Noa is not without fault either. In his past, he is guilty of having fallen in love with Frances although she was betrothed to Carl. Both Noa and Prospero are betrayed and cast into exile by men who are very close to them. Prospero has fled to Caliban’s island and Noa is banished from
Hawaiian society to his bush settlement. In the course of each play, both characters are engaged in vengeance – Prospero conjures a storm that delivers Antonio to him and Noa accepts Carl’s invitation to be the *kumu hula* of his Waikiki pageant. In his commentary on *The Tempest*, Shakespearean critic Stephen Orgel argues, “there is a profoundly retrospective quality to the drama, which is deeply involved in recounting and re-enacting past action, in evoking and educating the memory. If there is a path to reconciliation in the play, it is only through this” (Orgel, 1987, p. 5). Each remembers, and evokes and educates the memory, in order to move forward – Prospero recounts the mistakes of the past to Miranda and Noa recounts his past events via the legend of Kahikiloa and Kea that he tells to the pageant court. As Orgel says of Prospero “To narrate his history is to gain control of it, to revise and rectify the past” (Orgel, 1987, p.15) and Noa derives power from such a narration also: “It’s your story, Carl. You taught me the story. Remember?” (p.153), and later “the young ali’i made a big thing out of it, Carl...He wouldn’t let them go...Do you remember the story now, Carl?” (p.154). Both Prospero and Noa seek revenge for the events of the past and each is determined to recount and re-enact this past action in order to regain the mana that they have lost.

Both Prospero and Noa are imbued with supernatural powers that help them to achieve their ends. Both of them use these powers to re-write their scripts. Prospero uses his powers of sorcery to create the tempest that causes the shipwreck that brings Antonio to him. Noa is a ghost, an inhabitant of the spiritual world, who returns to teach the court to have “pity for each other” (p. 170). The power of pity is another parallel that resonates between *Mele Kanikau* and *The Tempest*. Just as Noa’s pity for Carl is revealed as the impetus for the events of the play, in *The Tempest*, Ariel coaxes Prospero’s pity for the shipwrecked Ferdinand, while evoking the audience’s pity for him. He says to Prospero
“Your charm so strongly works ‘em/ That if you now beheld them, your affections/ Would become tender” (V: i: 17-19). When Prospero asks, “Dost thou think so, spirit?” (V: i: 20) and Ariel answers “Mine would, sir, were I human” (V: i: 21), pity is evoked both within the play and from the audience. The spell that Prospero has worked on Ferdinand has been successful, and now he pities the victims of his revenge; just as the spell that Noa works on Carl is successful and engenders his pity and love. In Act III, the ghost of Kamuela asks “Does he really hear us now, kumu?”; Noa answers, “He hears”; and Frances adds “He pities” (p.172). A deep sense of pity and regret underpin both plays. In a sense, each character re-writes their own script to rectify the mistakes of the past. Prospero reclaims his Dukedom and creates a future for his daughter as the next queen of Naples. Noa returns to cause Carl to come to terms with who he is and who he should strive to be. Both Prospero and Noa are artists – Prospero declares his prowess at the liberal arts and Noa is a reputable kumu hula. They seem to live ‘authentic’ existences (although their supernatural/spiritual elements may contradict this) and they step outside normal societal conventions to challenge others to do the same.

*The Tempest* and *Mele Kanikau* look forward and backward. They each recount and attempt to resolve a moment of conflict from the past, but they each work towards a happier future. The end of *The Tempest* sees Prospero leave the island to return to Milan, and Miranda about to marry Ferdinand and live “happily ever after.” *Mele Kanikau* is a tragi-comedy and so it is not as hopeful in its ending, however there is the real possibility of change for Carl as he leaves the Waikiki pageant set. The play implies that his end is hopeful as he departs, refusing to live in the “make –believe world of ali’i and thrones and crowns” (p.172) any longer.
Both of the plays can be read through the discourses of colonization. As well as usurped, Prospero is also a usurper, taking ownership of Caliban’s island from him and re-enslaving the spirit Ariel. Noa is on the other side of colonial tropes. His land and culture have been taken from him, but the continuing betrayal of this culture occurs at the hands of Hawaiians themselves. Noa counsels Carl and all Hawaiians, by extension, to live more truly to their pre-colonial selves. He wants the colonized people of Hawai’i to know what they have lost because “if you don’t know that, you are not a Hawaiian” (p.148), and without this knowledge there is no hope for the future of Hawai’i.

A palimpsest is “something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface...an overlay of classes and generations” (Palimpsest, n.d.). *Mele Kanikau* may be read as a palimpsest of *The Tempest*. The layers of Shakespeare’s much older play are evident beneath the surface of Kneubuhl’s script. As a well-educated young playwright, Kneubuhl would have read the *Tempest* and been aware of its characters, content, and themes. That said, he might not have been aware that some of these same themes, characters and events may be read through the “overlay of classes and generations” in *Mele Kanikau*.

**In Summary**

This chapter continues the weaving of the *kie*, adding to its fineness and adorning it with the beads and sequins that add to its value. Here, I have argued that these six critical readings are essential to an understanding of *Mele Kanikau*, and also that these readings are only rendered possible through the performance and production of the play.

Each of these six readings provides a different critical insight into the world of the play. Kneubuhl’s deliberate use of some of the features of different genre attest to his wide
literary knowledge and his skill as a playwright. By weaving these overlapping strands into the *kie*, the tensions within *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* are highlighted – whether it is in the representation of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ Hawaiians, or in the dichotomy inherent between the hero and the villain. Each of these overlapping tensions reminds the audience of Kneubuhl’s own dual heritage and raises the questions of cultural authenticity, alienation, and the playwright and his craft that drove his writing for theatre and for Polynesian peoples. In addition, Kneubuhl’s presence in his own play as “the author of the play you are about to see” (p.99), and his attestation that “poets do not search for final meanings; we act, we celebrate” (p.165) contribute to deeper, critical consideration of the existential beliefs about creative acts that permeate his playwriting.
Spirit dancer Iva Hitila during the ‘Naupaka’ hula

Conclusion

*Ha’ina ‘ia mai ana ka puana:* the last refrain is sung
The truly meaningful events in the history of drama have always been homegrown and addressed to an audience whose soul they share.

John Enright, 1992, *Think of a Garden* programme notes, written five days before Kneubuhl’s death

**Shared souls**

The themes and messages of Kneubuhl’s work resonate strongly with me. Kneubuhl was an *afakasi* Samoan theatre-maker turned educator and I am an *afakasi* Tongan educator turned theatre-maker. These are also important strands of the *kie* that allow me to wear it comfortably – perhaps even ‘authentically’ – not in essentialist terms, but in the sense that my wearing of it is real. The conflicts and challenges Kneubuhl met in his work parallel those I have met in my work. New Zealand born *afakasi* Tongan-palangi poet Karlo Mila notes, “for this generation here in Aotearoa, the reality of our existence is that we do navigate, often uneasily, the divide between the Pacific world and the Palangi. We are the change agents, the walking, breathing, rapping, dancing, working catalysts” (Mila, 2001, p.24). John Kneubuhl was one of the first change agents in the Pacific theatre scene. By navigating the complicated spaces between his worlds, however uneasily, he advocated for theatre that spoke to and for Polynesian people. These messages may also make Polynesian people feel uneasy – not least because of Kneubuhl’s insider/outsider identity – however, the messages are undeniably important. Kneubuhl believed that, as Polynesians, we are the progeny of a rich, rich cultural heritage that should be present in the way we make theatre.
This thesis has woven together several research strands. The first strand explored Kneubuhl’s identity as an afakasi, transnational, syncretic theatre-maker and the ways in which the dramatic manifestation of this identity in *Mele Kanikau* forms the subject of and vehicle for his existential meditations on personal and cultural loss. The second strand woven into this *kie* was my production of *Mele Kanikau*, evoked in Chapter Two as a critical act of research, including the problems of direction and design that I negotiated in its staging and the creative solutions I found. Producing the play helped to form answers to the third of my research questions relating to the ways in which a pan-Polynesian, Pasifika production of *Mele Kanikau*, with its use of Hawaiian hula as a metonym for Hawaiian culture, could contribute to an understanding of the act of representation as central concern and subject matter of the drama. The third strand was woven into the *kie* in Chapter Four by employing six lenses through which to view *Mele Kanikau* in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which meta-drama functions to reveal, develop and problematize the drama of authenticity played out in the play.

In this Conclusion, these last strands of the *kie* are pulled, adjusted, balanced, and woven together. The beads and feathers that adorn it and add to its value are laid in place. The beads and feathers carefully chosen and positioned on this *kie* take the form of three dramatic sequences drawn from my production. By re-evoking these scenes in the conclusion, I intend to highlight the challenges and creative solutions that I encountered in my direction. These are the shining moments – like the beads and feathers – that add value to the weaving. They form the colours and textures that enrich the *faiva*.

The chapter takes its title from the traditional last verse of the hula, chanted before the performers finally rest. At the end of the play, the Author invokes the spirit of the deceased Georgina. In the script he “extends his hands, cupped, as if at the end of a hula”
and chants “HA’INA ‘IA MAI ANA KA PUANA” (p.175). This is translated into English in the footnotes as “the summary refrain is being told” (p.175), and in Pukui as “tell the summary refrain” (p.347). Over the last five years I have observed many hula, and have always been struck by this line that is sung as the first line of the final verse, before the final chorus. When speaking this line, the Author evokes a strong and enduring hula tradition – effectively singing a final refrain for us – as he lays Georgina, and the play, to rest.

Like Kneubuhl, my production was *afakasi* in nature. It existed in the grey area that “treats the real as unreal and the unreal as real equally” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). It was an authentically pan-Polynesian production of a Hawaiian playscript by a Samoan playwright, while at the same time critiquing such claimed acts of authenticity – particularly in the theatre when all we can achieve are acts of representation.

In production then, like Kneubuhl, I have been problematically inside and outside the peoples and cultures I have sought to represent, and like him, this has been both my “illness and my out” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989). As Berger writing on the Kumu Kahua Theatre production of *Mele Kanikau* in 1998 acknowledges: “Events that surface as the story plays out may seem dated, even wrongheaded in 1998, but the core issues are timeless. What is Hawaiian culture? What is the correct way to portray Hawaiian history and cultural traditions?” (Berger, 1998). Staging *Mele Kanikau* has brought me kanohi ki te kanohi with these questions and challenges.

**STAGING LOSS: NAUPAKA**

On page 117 of Kneubuhl’s playscript, Noa declares that “something is missing” from Carl’s pageant (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.117), an idea that is a key concern of the play as a whole.
In addition to the “o’o, mamo, i’iwi” the play also focuses on other “missing things”- authenticity, language, culture, and dead children. Edmond, writing on loss in *Mele Kanikau*, argues that: “throughout the trilogy, [Kneubuhl] plays with the fact that the re-enactment is less than the life it represents, and, in this way, is able to present drama as an art of loss” (Edmond, M., 1998, p.481).

Staging missing things and loss presented some of the complex challenges of directing *Mele Kanikau*. Not only did I have to solve the paradox of representing what is fundamentally un-representable and producing what Kneubuhl deemed to be un-producible, I had to find a way to stage the “something missing” and to create a space where the dead were able to grieve for the living.

On page 99, I described the hula entitled ‘Naupaka’. This was a complex section of the play to lift from the page to the stage. In my editing of the script, I cut six lines of text during which Noa and Frances discuss their love and fear. At this point in the play, both Noa and Frances are aware that they are ghosts but are fearful for the rest of their halau, who are not aware of this yet. They have arrived at the pageant set with Kamuela and Pokipala, but the other dancers have not arrived yet, and as Noa says “they must listen and hear it for themselves...We cannot sing their mele kanikau for them” (p. 112). The stage directions in Kneubuhl’s script read as follows:

*NOA* chants in Hawaiian. *It is almost a wailing. In the background, attracted by his voice, KAMUELA appears, unseen by them. He hears, listens in rising grief, and he dances, dances out his fear, grief, and finally acceptance. He moves off into the darkness as the chant comes to a finish. FRANCES has calmed down somewhat* (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.113).
One of my significant directorial decisions was to adapt this scene. I wanted to stage Noa and Frances’ pain, fear, love, and loss. I asked Kumu Aruna and Kumu Blaine for a song that would suit the love triangle in the play and they contributed the song ‘Naupaka,’ which describes forbidden love. However, as well as showing the troubled relationship between Noa and Frances, I also wanted to present the idea of the ghosts, and of the rest of Noa’s halau travelling through the murmuring darkness looking for them. Instead of Pokipala or Kamuela drawn to the sound of Noa’s voice, I wanted to stage loss in the form of three spirit dancers from the halau, dressed in white and draped with greenery, dancing a hula, searching in the darkness for their lost kumu. Within ‘Naupaka’ I also wanted to stage the story through the music. The strumming of the guitars and a light drumbeat began under Noa’s spoken plea to Frances “Say with me. I accept,” and her pledge in return “I can accept anything – forever...heaven or hell, anything – if you are there beside me” (p.113). The music rose as Noa cried “Aue!” leading into he and Frances singing the first verse together. The story then flowed to the musicians who joined them in the chorus and took over the singing of the second verse. They represent Noa’s halau who are making their way through the “murmuring darkness” to where Noa and Frances are. Finally, the song came to rest with the Author who sang the final verse, maintaining his hold on the story that he is telling of Noa and Frances. I intended to stage loss in this scene and to give the audience the first hint of the spirit world and the ghosts that are such an intrinsic part of the play. Noa and Frances sat at one end of the stage, and the three spirit dancers danced a verse each at the other end of the stage, looking longingly at Noa and Frances, but unable to reach them. ‘Naupaka’ was a mele kanikau sung and danced by separate parties who shared the theme of personal and collective loss, and a significant theme of the play as a whole.
Throughout this thesis, I have wrestled with the concepts of representation and authenticity, always conscious that they are often at odds with each other, that each intrinsically underpins every drama, and that authentic representation is an impossible paradox. The threads of this paradox are woven throughout Mele Kanikau in its tales of loss. Sometimes the threads are woven in plain sight through the metatheatrical character of the Author; sometimes they lie just beneath the surface in the legend of Kahikiloa and Kea; sometimes symbolically in the existence of the dead children; and sometimes in the melodrama of the pageant. Kneubuhl does not resolve the conflicts presented by these losses. Instead, his best advice to us is in the final lines of the play:

listen...always listen...and remember. For it is only in our remembering that we make our mele, like houses of words into which our dead can move and live again and speak to us. O listen to their voices!...It is in you they grieve; it is through you they speak. (Kneubuhl, 1997, p. 175)

In the Introduction, I described the custom of laying down or gifting kie to mark loss, and to give honour. This kie acknowledges Wendt’s assertion that “our dead are woven into our souls like the hypnotic music of bone flutes. We cannot escape them. If we let them, they can help illuminate us to ourselves and to each other” (1993, p. 10). This kie also heeds Kneubuhl’s advice, and it is itself an act of listening and remembering and a way of building houses of words in which “our dead” – the characters of the play and Kneubuhl himself – are invited to “move and live again and speak to us.”
**Staging Authenticity: The Fluidity of the Author, Tui Atua and the Heiau**

Kneubuhl himself commented, “Directors, have time and again said that the good fun they get, of directing a play of mine, is that every last little thing plays” (Kneubuhl in Enright, 1989) and this is certainly true of *Mele Kanikau*. The second act of my production began with a succession of three scenes that challenged me as a director in different ways. The first was an adaptation of the scene Kneubuhl positions within the intermission where Kamuela, Pokipala, and Hi’iaka practice the hula they will dance later in the play for the pageant court. The second was the monologue delivered by the Author to begin the second act. The third was a comical conversation of a sexual nature between the members of the *halau*.

With my direction, I intended these scenes to be cohesive and to flow from one into the other. I chose to adapt this scene by allowing the Author to show his command of the story through his actions, thematic links between what he says and what the *halau* pick up, and through his perceived manipulation of music and lights. The Second Act of my *Mele Kanikau* began halfway through the ten-minute intermission. At this point on a cue from the stage manager the *halau* entered, exploring the Waikiki pageant stage as if they were seeing the “big city” for the first time and speaking lines that we added to our performance script in Hawaiian ʻōlelo. The older members of the *halau* then gathered the girls together in a circle centre stage to run hula drills in time to Pokipala’s drumming on the *ipu heke* and an ongoing Hawaiian four count “ekahi...elu...ekolu...eha.” At this point, the Author entered and wove his way through the hula dancers, mimicking their moves and counting along with them. The girls continued dancing as though he was not there, although he was weaving amongst them. I intended this weaving to illustrate the
way in which the Author was weaving his story together and making it up as he went along. As they were dancing, he was inventing them. When he reached the Waikiki stage and announced, “The Second Act begins” (p.137), the dancers sat, the house lighting flicked off, the stage lights flicked on, and he took command of the telling again. I edited from the script fifteen lines where the Author describes the treatment of the dead in his grandfather’s village in order to ensure that the three scenes flowed together. This meant that the Author’s interaction with the halau linked to the sexual nature of the Author’s retelling of the legend of the seductive Tui Atua, which, in turn, fed into the sexual jesting between the members of the halau. The second and third of the two scenes did not flow together as well as I had hoped and this was a challenge for me as a director. Lauie was able to dramatize Tui Atua’s manifestation as both the “handsome young man” and the “beautiful girl” who seduced villagers on moonlit nights until “in the climax of their passion” they die. However, the cast members of the halau were embarrassed by the sexual nature of the scripted conversation and presented the scene unconvincingly, laughing their way through the carrots, cucumbers, and bananas in the heiau. As the director of a young, Polynesian theatre troupe, I understand that some subjects are culturally taboo, and I know that it was too difficult for these dancers (who were undoubtedly dancers first, and actors second) to deal with this subject matter and to present it in front of each other and their friends and family. In the end, it was more important to me to teu le va, than to insist that the halau portray this scene in a more overtly sexual way. I still felt that, as Kneubuhl says, “every little thing play[ed]” in the overall context of the production.
The final strands of this *kie* ring with Kneubuhl’s words through the mouthpiece of the Author: “Poets don’t search for final meaning...they act...they create...” (p. 165). Kneubuhl believed strongly in the artifice of the theatre and of his own plays as “acts of becoming.” He fought publication for a long time because publication renders a work finished: “it’s fixed and dead and I don’t like that” (Kneubuhl in Johnson, 1991). Kneubuhl thought that plays and poems were never finished, but rather, works in progress. Therefore the most authentic message we might divine from his work might be that to live “authentically” as Polynesians or otherwise, we too must be engaged in existential acts of “becoming” and in this, like poets, “we act, we celebrate” (p.165).

**STAGING REPRESENTATION: THE BIG REVEAL**

Staging ghosts was an ongoing challenge for my direction of *Mele Kanikau*. I did this throughout the production using subtle lighting changes from warm to cold when the ghosts came on stage with the spirit dancers of the Naupaka scene, and finally using white costume. Hereniko writes in the forward to his play, *Last Virgin in Paradise*, that “casting that brings together people from the different Pacific islands is encouraged” (Hereniko & Teaiwa, 1993, p.xi). In the section entitled ‘Our Mele’ in the Introduction, I indicated my intention for my production to be a story for 2013. I wanted this cross-cultural Pasifika casting “that brings people together” to be visible within the show, and I staged this in the return of the ghosts for the reveal at the end of our Act II (Kneubuhl’s Act III).

In Kneubuhl’s script, Charles returns from the empty dressing room in the middle of Carl’s conversation with Keaka Ching and tells him that “the room looks like nobody’s been in it for months” (p.166). Then Kneubuhl’s stage directions instruct:
As if materializing out of nowhere, NOA appears from behind a pillar in the background. He is in the costume of a kumu hula of long, long ago. He stands very still, his head bowed (Kneubuhl, 1997, p.166).

Gradually, Frances and the rest of the halau also materialize on stage, invisible to the living characters. Later, the ghosts have a 24 line conversation. I made the directorial decision to cut all of the lines spoken by the ghosts on their return. To me, their onstage presence and silent support of Carl was enough. Another decision I made was to change the costuming. Each of the hula dancers was directed to wear the white ceremonial dress of their own Pasifika cultures. In this way, their silent presence was also a metatheatrical tribute to their own island nations and the Pasifika cultures that we also strove to represent within this Hawaiian story.

A period of 38 years separates Kneubuhl’s writing of Mele Kanikau from my production. During this time, cultural renaissances for indigenous peoples have happened in both Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, with varied degrees of success. This resurgence, and Auckland’s growing Polynesian population are some of the factors that made my production possible, relevant, and indeed necessary. Kneubuhl wrote the playscript at a time when a production of Mele Kanikau may not have been possible. There was arguably not enough cultural knowledge in the community theatre of Honolulu to be able to successfully portray the Hawaiian characters and their ‘ōlelo and hula. In Auckland, in 2013, this was perhaps also true. Only through the re-interpretation of Kneubuhl’s Hawaiian story as a story for all Polynesians was my production of Mele Kanikau possible.

In his review of my production of Mele Kanikau, Aaron Taouma remarked that the play “is a piece of masterful writing; a play within a play, examining the theatrical process itself while weaving multiple story threads together in a seemingly simple plot, which as
it progresses is not so simple, and indeed nothing is what it seems” (Taouma, 2013). Wendt also provided an informal review of the production saying “Large cast, wonderful acting, especially by the main actors, riveting music and singing and dancing of the hula, and the production held my attention to its full stretch. It’s a difficult play to stage but Michelle and the cast and crew did a valiant and successful and innovative job of it” (Wendt, 2013). My creative vision for Mele Kanikau sought to weave the multiple threads of the play together with threads of our own and to turn them into a new, but truthful, representation of Kneubuhl’s 38-year-old, Hawaiian play, as told by a group of Polynesians in Aotearoa.

**Napo’o‘ana‘akala: The Setting of the Sun**

At the international airports of Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, visitors are greeted with images and sounds that belong to the indigenous peoples of the lands. They are “aloha”-ed and “kia ora”-ed through the arrival gates. This is an overt manifestation of the knife-edge balance between the genuine and the exploitative. On one side there appears to be a legitimate attempt to revive, recognize and thereby authenticate the indigenous people of the land (‘E nā kānaka o kā ‘āina/tangata whenua) and their culture and language; and on the other there is a terrible, tourism-motivated bastardization of peoples who have already been subjugated and oppressed by colonial intruders. Haunani-Kay Trask, heavily critical of the American presence in Hawai‘i, describes this as “the destruction of our land and the prostitution of our culture” (1993, p.180). A surface-level reading of Kneubuhl’s Mele Kanikau will also reveal this concern with the commodification of culture and the wider implications that this commodification represents.
Possibly the most prominent reading of the play considers it a drama of cultural crisis. *Mele Kanikau* clearly illustrates the cultural devastation caused by the “ogre” of the tourist industry and its catastrophic effects on indigenous Hawaiians. It exposes the Hawaiian *aliʻi* class (past and present); and through the figures of Lydia and Carl, the play indicates the crisis point reached c. 1975. The play calls on young Polynesians not to forget their culture. This was a concept we know Kneubuhl taught through many of his writings and that he bore witness to in many of his actions - his teachings about theatre and most especially in his many years of advocacy for bilingual education in American Samoa. In Carl’s final commitment to live a more authentic life we can read Kneubuhl’s charge to all Polynesians to do the same.

I have argued that an understanding of Kneubuhl’s development and achievement as a playwright can be derived from the close study of his final trilogy. The multiple readings of *Mele Kanikau* are necessary to understanding the mastery of the playwright’s work. In Chapter Four, six readings of the play have been explored, each one enriching the reading experience, and each one necessary to a developing understanding of the playwright’s fusion of Western and Polynesian theatre-making. Each of these six readings is a strand of the *kie*, and only by laying them on top of and weaving them through one another is the *faiva* of Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau* achieved. Like the stands of the *kie*, each of these readings strengthens and adds to the rich texture of the others, and only when read together can this *kie* function to adorn its wearer.

However, the greatest understanding of Kneubuhl’s contribution to Pasifika playwriting and his melding of two theatrical traditions to speak to Polynesian specific themes of alienation and loneliness is only possible in performance. In my production of *Mele Kanikau* the many readings of the playscript were brought to theatrical life. In
performance, *Mele Kanikau* took on all of its meanings, nuances and themes as a Hawaiian play, as an existential play, and as a play that questions the nature of authenticity – theatrical and cultural. Moreover, it also became a play specific to its own time, space and place. In performance, Kneubuhl’s *Mele Kanikau* “moved and breathed and lived” again. In performance, my cast and crew built our “houses of words” to hold Kneubuhl’s and our own Polynesian dead who “help[ed] illuminate us to ourselves”.

How then, to conclude a thesis, based on a playwright who argues that the artist has an obligation to work towards answers:

*We all know the questions. You undoubtedly have some of your own. The trouble, however, is that so few of us bother to work towards answers. That the layman does not bother is regrettable. But that an artist, any artist, but especially the playwright, does not is calamitous* (Kneubuhl, n.d., “playwriting lecture notes”).

However, he simultaneously, emphatically and repeatedly stated “there are no answers, no anything” (Kneubuhl in Mealey, 1942, p.265). Perhaps the answer is to place Kneubuhl in an *afakasi*-esque space. Rather than positioning him as a steadfast advocate for the resurrection of ancient Polynesian traditions, I ultimately argue that Kneubuhl prompts us to engage more authentically in “acts of becoming” and he challenges us to be agents of change forging the sometimes uneasy ways in which we, as Polynesians, navigate our plural identities.

This thesis makes its unique contribution to the field of English and Drama Studies by critically and creatively examining the work of *afakasi* American-American Samoan playwright, John Kneubuhl – self-proclaimed “World’s greatest Swiss/Welsh/ Samoan playwright”, acknowledged by Balme and Castersen as the “spiritual father of Pacific Theatre”.

In my Introduction, I cited Ka‘ili’s comments on the interconnectedness of people and genealogy with the quote: “‘Oku hangē ‘a e tangata ha fala ‘oku lālanga” (Mankind is like a mat being woven)” (Ka‘ili, 2005, pp.90-1). In Tongan culture, the kie, or the woven mat, is a valuable possession, imbued with mana. It is handed down through generations as an item of cultural significance and monetary value. The kie is a manifestation of culture, craft, wealth, and family. It is gifted at momentous life occasions – at weddings, births, or deaths and it is worn as a symbol of respect, or faka‘apa‘apa, for an audience. My kie is woven to be worn, but also to be passed on. This kie has been woven, as Hereniko writes in Woven Gods: “to tell other Pacific Islanders interested in travelling the same road to take comfort in the knowledge that one of them has been on it before, and has left a map that they can use, modify, or discard as they choose” (Hereniko, 1995, p.11). Weaving this kie has been an act of research, but also, as Kneubuhl argues, an “act of becoming.” As I wrote in the Introduction, it has also been an act of remembering, listening and of building the houses of words through which I hope I have enabled the work of John Kneubuhl – afakasi Polynesian theatre-maker – to “live and breathe and speak to us.” In tying these final strands together, like the Author, my last refrain is sung.

Ha'ina ‘ia mai ana ka puana.
Rest, then, Georgina, rest.
A NOTE ON THE BIBLIOGRAPHY:

The “Kneubuhl Bibliography” precedes the general bibliography. Texts listed in this section include Kneubuhl’s published and unpublished plays, his television scripts and various other ephemera held by Victoria Kneubuhl in Honolulu, and Jackie Pualani Johnson in Hilo. This mini-bibliography is organized by heading and then by date.

Texts or articles listed in the Kneubuhl bibliography may also appear in the general bibliography listed under the author’s name. This is for ease of reference between the main bibliography and the body of the thesis. Anyone interested in sourcing the unpublished materials listed in the Kneubuhl Bibliography will need to arrange this with the appropriate person.

--- [c.1987]. Resume.


Kneubuhl’s Plays:

(NB: Kneubuhl’s plays and performances are listed in the table on page 82)

1941  Saint Mac, Yale Drama School. Yale University.

1942  The Sunset Crowd. Yale Repertory Theatre.

1946  The Harp in the Willows. Honolulu Community Theatre. Hawai‘i.

1947  The City is Haunted. Honolulu Community Theatre. Hawai‘i.

1948  The Sound of Hunting, toured the Hawaiian Islands. Hawai‘i.

1949  Point Distress. Theatre Hawai‘i, Honolulu. Hawai‘i.

**Kneubuhl’s Hollywood Television Scripts:**

1953  *Your Favorite Story* (TV series)
1954  *Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.*, (TV series)
1955  *Medic* (TV series)
1955  *TV Reader’s Digest* (TV series)
1955  *Waterfront* (TV series)
1955-1956  *Climax!* (TV series)
1956  *Front Row Center* (TV series)
1956  *General Electric Theater* (TV series)
1957  *West Point* (TV series)
1957-1958  *Suspicion* (TV series)
1958  *Flight* (TV series)
1958  *Lux Playhouse* (TV series)
1958  *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars* (TV series)
1958  *Target* (TV series)
1958  *The Screaming Skull* (written by)
1958  *The True Story of Lynn Stuart* (adaptation and screenplay / as John H. Kneubuhl)
1958-1962  *Have Gun - Will Travel* (TV series)
1959 *Behind Closed Doors* (TV series)

1959 *Doctor Mike* (TV movie)

1959-1960 *Markham* (TV series)

1959-1961 *Adventures in Paradise* (TV series)

1960 *Checkmate* (TV series)

1960 *Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse* (TV series)

1960-1962 *Thriller* (TV series)

1961 *Dr. Kildare* (TV series)

1961-1962 *Alcoa Premiere* (TV series)

1962 *Kraft Mystery Theater* (TV series)

1962-1965 *Wagon Train* (TV series)

1963 *G.E. True* (TV series)

1963-1964 *Gunsmoke* (TV series)

1964 *Ben Casey* (TV series)

1965 *Two on a Guillotine* (screenplay)


1966 *Felony Squad* (TV series)

1966 *The Fugitive* (TV series)

1967 *Iron Horse* (TV series)

1967 *The Invaders* (TV series)

1968 *Hawai’i Five-O* (TV series)

1968 *Star Trek* (TV series)

1968 *The Sunshine Patriot* (TV movie)
Ephemera

Undated notes written by Kneubuhl:

n.d. Kneubuhl Notes on Kneubuhl family tree
n.d. Kneubuhl Family photographs (source: Victoria Kneubuhl)
 n.d. Kneubuhl “college talk notes”
n.d. Kneubuhl Notes – “Drama as Narrative”
n.d. Kneubuhl “playwriting lecture notes”
n.d. Kneubuhl “draft of Mele Kanikau”

Newspaper clippings held by Victoria Kneubuhl and Jackie Pualani Johnson:

n.d. (no recorded publication name) “Dorothy Schenk, John Kneubuhl Are Married”
n.d. (no recorded publication name) “Kneubuhl Will Produce Main Aloha Week Shows”
n.d. (no recorded publication name) “John Kneubuhl Authors TV Dramas”
n.d. (no recorded publication name) “Obituaries: ‘Renaissance man’ Kneubuhl” by Kris M. Tanahara
n.d. (no recorded publication name) “Kneubuhl Has Achieved Acclaim As TV Writer”
n.d. (no recorded publication name) “Going completely semi-native” by David Johnson
1950 (June 4) The Honolulu Advertiser: “World Premiere Of Kneubuhl Play To Be Seen Here” (on Point Distress)
1950 (June 21) The Honolulu Advertiser: “Point Distress Proves Edge-of-Seat Thriller” by Edna B Lawson
1977 (Feb 24)  *Hawai‘i Observer*: “John Kneubuhl: A sense of loss” by Catherine Bratt

1993 (Feb 9)  *Samoana*: “Manatu i se Fatoaga” (on *Think of a Garden*. No author identified)


1995 (May 20)  *The Honolulu Advertiser*: “Island Life: Kumu Kahua cast reaches deeply into a memory of loss” by Joseph T Rozmiarek (on *Think of a Garden*)


1995 (Aug)  *Pacific Islands Monthly*: “South Sea schizophrenia” by Ed Rapell (on *Think of a Garden*)

Programmes/Production related materials:

1975-76  Honolulu Community Theatre – *Harp in the Willows* programme

1990 (March)  *Behind the Scenes at the UHH*51 *Theatre, Vol. 6, No.1.* – *A Play: A Play, World Premiere.*

1990  UHH Performing Arts Department – *A Play: A Play* programme

1992 (Feb 18)  “Kneubuhl’s *Think of a Garden* Premiers” – notes by John Enright

c. 1992 (Feb)  Island Community Theatre (Pagopago, American Samoa) – *Think of a Garden* programme

51 University of Hawai‘i - Hilo
1993  Taki Rua Theatre – *Think of a Garden* programme notes

1995  (Feb 23)  Kumu Kahua Theatre – audition notice for *Think of a Garden* (dir. Dennis Carroll)

1995  (May)  Kumu Kahua Theatre – *Think of a Garden* programme

2007  *Eden is the Place We Leave* – unproduced documentary about John Kneubuhl

**Personal Correspondence:**

1984  (April 17)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Jackie Pualani Johnson

1987  (Aug 8)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Ken Kolb

1988  (May 9)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Ken Kolb

1988  (March 26)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Ken Kolb

1988  (Aug 19)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Ken Kolb

1989  (Feb 28)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Ken Kolb

1989  (Nov 1)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Bob Evans

1991  (Feb 16)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Jackie Pualani Johnson

1991  (Sep 25)  personal correspondence – Kneubuhl to Jackie Pualani Johnson

1992  (Feb)  Eulogy notes by John Enright

1992  (Feb 26)  “John Kneubuhl, The Artist” – John Enright to the Arts Council, Pagopago

1992  (June 18)  personal correspondence - Ann Andrews to Jackie Pualani Johnson

1994  (July 26)  personal correspondence – John Enright to Jackie Pualani Johnson

1995  (July 12)  personal correspondence – Ken Kolb to Mr Hajim
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Hau'ofa, E. (2008). We are the ocean: Selected works. Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press.


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Potiki, R. (1996). An interview with Christopher Balme - "It is political if it can be
passed on." In P. Pavis (Ed.), The intercultural performance reader (pp. 172-178).
New York: Routledge.


Taouma, L. (2004). ‘Gauguin is dead ... there is no paradise’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 25:1, 35-46, DOI: 10.1080/07256860410001687009


Trask, H.-K. (1993). *From a Native daughter: Colonialism and sovereignty in*


APPENDIX A

DVD recording of Mele Kanikau

This recording was made of the final show – May 5, 2013.
The quality of the DVD, audio in particular, is not of a high quality. It was impossible to get decent sound coverage in the auditorium that was packed to capacity, of a show was performed on a long, thin traverse stage.

APPENDIX B

Poster and Flier for Mele Kanikau

APPENDIX C

Mele Kanikau programme