

THE BACKSTORY – COPPER PROMISES

I speak, the house speaks. I dance, the house dances.

VICTORIA HUNT is from Ngati Hinemihi, a sub-tribe of Tuhourangi, Te Arawa. Hinemihi is one of Victoria's female ancestors – embodied in a traditional Maori meetinghouse.

A meetinghouse is the community space on a Marae Atea (tribal land). It is a tapu (sacred) place where people gather for the important rituals in life. Where the core business is relationships. Where they are laid out in death. Where the living ritually engage with the dead who in turn provide guidance to the living.

Victoria has created *Copper Promises: Hinemihi Haka* after a decade of embodied research across three countries. She's travelled from Brisbane to Auckland, Rotorua to Minto and Sydney to Surrey over time, collecting video imagery, recording sound and interviews and making a series of short dance works. She's written, danced and dreamt this material and has now shaped it into a work that merges feeling and gesture as they echo across landscape and through time.

In 2010, Victoria Hunt and Fiona Winning created *Dancing the Dead: A Performed Conversation* as a means of expressing some of the extensive body of research up to that point. It was performed as part of two festivals – LiveWorks at Performance Space and InBetween Time in Bristol. Here is an excerpt of that conversation.

VH Six years ago, I went to New Zealand for the first time. I was welcomed into the whanau (family) and that's where I learned about Hinemihi.

The first I knew of her was when my relations took me to our ancestral mountain and lake – Tarewara. I'm from the tribe Ngati Hinemihi. I was introduced to tribal stories and ceremonies. They told me about ancestors and in particular about Hinemihi who was embodied in a meetinghouse a long time ago. My uncle was sad and kind of embarrassed when he showed me the empty grove in the paddock where Hinemihi had been.

He told me, 'she's in England now', and that I'd have to go there to visit my marae, He told me all attempts to bring her back had failed. He didn't know the details but expressed himself with so much feeling. It was the unsaid and the emotion that I remember most.

FW So, from that initial meeting with your uncle, you began a journey of discovery starting with several trips to New Zealand.

VH To spend time with my relations. Collectivity is essential in

understanding Maoridom. So experiencing Maori culture as a performance of community was important for me.

FW You worked with MAU dance company collaborating with contemporary Maori and Pacific artists

VH Which helped me understand the concept of Kaupapa, which are the guiding principals shaping life and the art from a Maori Pacific Islander perspective. And lots of other research – interviews, visits to museums and libraries... and to Hinemihi in the UK....

FW You learned your whakapapa or genealogy...

VH That's fundamental to knowing who you are in relation to your whanau... or family, your place and origins of life...

FW So Hinemihi, like you, was separated from her whanau?

VH I'm in Australia and she's in the UK. We're both on other people's Whenua....

FW ... other people's land. The story of how she got to be in England begins a long time ago.

VH The century before last. The Treaty of Waitangi had been brokered and there was ongoing conflict between Maoris and English settlers over land ownership... but it was a truly bi-cultural place...

British tourism flourished and one of the greatest sites was Lake Rotamahana and the famously beautiful Pink and White Terraces of the Te Wairoa region.

FW Loads of pakeha or Europeans visited to experience Maori culture and practices and bask in the healing waters of the mineral baths.

VH Chief Aporo Te Wharekaniwha of the sub-tribe Ngati Hinemihi

FW Your great great grandfather...

VH Commissioned the old carver Wero Taroi and his apprentice Tene Waitere to build Hinemihi. Both carvers created traditional Maori patterns using European metal tools.

FW Hinemihi is a whare tipuna meetinghouse. So the architecture of the house *is* the body of Hinemihi.

VH She's the architectural depiction of the body of an ancestor. She has 26 carvings that give a cosmological explanation for whakapapa, tribal history and concepts. She represents the spirit of the people, the spirit of the dead. The Poutokomanawa is the heart post that separates earth and sky. The Tuaha is the backbone. The Heke rafters are her ribs. The Pou inside the back wall is the symbolic Arai portal servicing the journey of the spirits.

The Pare which is the carved door lintel around the entrance, is a threshold... into Hinenuitepo, where you move from the noa or profane into the tapu or sacred. All houses are designed to fulfill these cultural practices. Waiting with potential to be ritually enacted.

FW Hinemihi's imbued with the bicultural from the start – she's a hybrid of both old and new worlds.

VH She's a transitional house. She represents the imagination of the people and the spirit of the age. She was built during horrific times of colonization. The house is supposed to be something you decode – it tells a story. The *tekoteko* apex figure on the outside of Hinemihi had a European snap brimmed hat and there are boots instead of bare feet. And the eyes of the *poutokomanawa* which traditionally would have been paua shell were replaced by English gold sovereign coins.

Wero and his young apprentice Tene Waitere were the most sort after carvers and maverick contemporaries of the day. It was a collision of worlds, conflicting between what is correct and what is now.

FW Two value and belief systems coming together... old ways of being crossing with new ones.

VH There was an old prophecy, people say, the Tohunga or seer of the hapu dreamt the prophecy back and saw that the use of sovereigns instead of paua shell would bring on complete devastation to the tribe.

FW And in 1886, a mixed group of Maori locals and pakeha tourists, saw a phantom canoe. The high priest Tumakoha Te Whanapipi interpreted this as a warning. He was outraged that the people and resources were being exploited without due regard to ancestral values.

VH Then in the early hours of June 10, the mountains of Wāhanga, Ruawāhia and Tarawera split apart. Devastating! The most cataclysmic event in the tribes existence. Our sacred Mountain blew up! The ancestral bones in the caves turned to ash and scattered across the country. The next day was pitch black with ash choking the skies. Lake Rotomahana, its terraces and over 150 Tūhourangi–Ngāti Rangitihi & Ngāti Hinemihi residents were buried.

FW Around 60 people sheltered in Hinemihi, including Tene Waitere, the carver, Guide Sophia, the Matakite, and other ancestors of yours.

VH They used the benches inside to prop up the ceiling and keep the tons of ash from caving in...you could hear the eruption from the top of the North Island to the South island. Apparently one old man chanted a Maori incantation and then a European prayer over and over all night...

FW //// So what happened when they got out?

VH They were offered places by other hapu from Te Arawa and established themselves there.

- FW And the land?
- VH It had become urupa – a burial ground and was wahi tapu or untouchable, restricted. It was uninhabitable for a long time. It was an act of respect to leave the land for a time. The loss was unfathomable.
- FW But to non-Maori, this was interpreted as abandonment, even neglect.
- VH A ritual was performed over the area meaning it became restricted. No maori would live there. The land was acquired by the Government and has never been returned.... Today there are signs around my mountain saying trespasses will be prosecuted and you can only access the Tarawera 'officially' through a privately owned tourist operation. There are rumbles of this changing.. laws are swinging back to a hand over of tribal lands back to indigenous peoples
- FW So what happened to Hinemihi?
- VH Parts of her were looted. Three of the outside carvings were removed by relic hunters. Including the pare or lintel carving.
- FW And that's resurfaced after years of being lost on the black market and is now in a auction house in Paris.
- VH She's been cut on both sides to fit as a mantelpiece for a fireplace surround, she needs to be back on our whare tipuna. Effectively the Pare represents her pelvis. I've heard recently she's been taken off the market and gone to ground again. We've lost her... she's surrounded by foreign values in a foreign place. So she's effectively frozen....
- FW And the rest of Hinemihi is in an English country garden.
- VH Lord Onslow, the British Governor of New Zealand bought Hinemihi as a memento of his time there and took her to his Clandon Park mansion in Surrey. She was his 'souvenir' from his time in the Antipodes.
- FW I wonder if he had any idea what effect taking her would have... the mourning, the loss of the information in the carvings... the sense of 'remembrance' she embodied...
- VH Now she's in the care and control of the UK National Trust with the rest of Onslow's estate. A spirit house in the grounds of an English country garden. The Ngati Hinemihi tribe, Ngati Ranana UK and the Trust are currently trying to recognise each other.
- FW To lay out their different ways of 'knowing' and negotiate around their very different understandings of conservation. I notice in all the Trust's descriptions, Hinemihi used to be described as a house, a work of art, an inanimate object. But they've updated their language in the last couple of years to call Hinemihi 'she'.
- VH To acknowledge that to us, she's living, imbued with tribal memory and spiritual strength... a physical pathway to the other world.

Very early in this process, my Uncle Wally told me my ambition to dance Hinemihi was actually bringing her back. I feel that's what I'm doing. Bringing Hinemihi back.



Photo: Manuel Vason