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How Did You Know How We Are? A Study in Cross-Cultural Theatre

LAURA GARDNER SALAZAR

As the world grows smaller, theatres find themselves addressing many groups other than their home audiences. The Honolulu Theatre for Youth faced this problem when it mounted *Song for the Navigator*, a play designed also for Micronesian and mainland audiences. When the elderly grandfather in *Song for the Navigator* tells his grandson, "Old magic still work, but sometimes need new equipment," he could well have been describing the Honolulu Theatre's work as it began reaching out to the Pacific in 1982 and 1983 when it made tours to American Samoa.

"These experiences gave the theatre a sense of continued responsibility to do developmental work. Past tours to the mainland were fun, but they had little to do with what HTY could do in the Pacific," said Managing Director Jane Campbell. On these tours the company met Charlotte Rath, economic advisor to Governor Coleman. When she moved to Honolulu, she and Campbell and the late John Kaufman, the theatre's artistic director, talked about their interest in the new Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, chartered the summer of 1986. Lino Olopai, a Micronesian native attached to the University of Hawaii, became a cultural consultant for the project. Together in 1985 they applied for funding from the National Endowment for the Arts so that the Honolulu Theatre for Youth could stage a play about Micronesia. It would chronicle a young boy's journey toward pride in his heritage as he learned skills of Micronesian navigation from his grandfather.

When HTY received the required \$40,000 funding, and the work began, playwright Michael Cowell joined the project. He talked extensively to Olopai and his cousin Piailug from Satawal, the one place in the commonwealth where the ancient skills of navigation are still generally known and practiced. Over the past 4000 years, Micronesians have traveled up to 2000 miles without modern charts and compasses, crossing the oceans to seek the smallest of islands for trade, war, and social contact. Their ships are of a unique design built slightly off-center, with the ability to change direction by moving the sail from one angle to the other. As a part of the American Bicentennial, the great Satawal navigator, Mau Piailug, successfully guided a canoe from Honolulu to Samoa, a course he had never covered before, using only his experience as a navigator and the skill and tradition of his people as a guide.

Playwright Michael Cowell and director John Kauffman realized that their central problem would be portraying a foreign culture to that very culture, believably com-

binning the unique with the universal. Together they began their own journey, much like that of the leading character in the play, their own search for the skills to navigate untried waters as they shaped the production.

Kauffman's research took him over 7000 miles and to a variety of sources. In Honolulu he met Micronesian people, and along with Cowell, developed a bibliography for the project. Rath planned a tour of Micronesia designed to acquaint the playwright and director more intimately with the land and its peoples. In May, Cowell, Rath, and Kauffman left on a month-long search to experience Micronesia for themselves. Their route took them to Saipan and Guam, where they interviewed dozens of people, taping stories and exposing roll after roll of film.

Although Kauffman kept a record of the facts and his impressions, a problem plagued the group: how much could they trust the stories given them. In Micronesia the navigator's knowledge is his personal power and wealth to be handed down to his son or beloved nephew. Would the Satawalese trust their precious information to outsiders? Equally important, Micronesians love practical jokes. They would not be above exaggeration for a laugh.

Back in Hawaii, Charlotte Rath worried about the Micronesians' love of practical jokes. Because they take such pleasure in developing elaborate, semi-cruel jokes for each other and strangers (their equivalent of selling the Brooklyn Bridge to a greenhorn), she knew that these antics should be a part of the story. If included, she mused, they might not play in Honolulu and Seattle. In her experience many Westerners had no understanding of the Micronesian sense of humor.

There was the larger problem of directing a play about Micronesia for three separate audiences: Hawaiians, mainlanders, and the Micronesians themselves. Kauffman thought this over and finally reached the conclusion that, "I have to consider Hawaii to be my audience. The play has been made for Hawaiians, and the Honolulu Theatre for Youth is for Hawaii. It would be nice to restage for the other two audiences, but in a sense I will just have to let them get out of it what they can." He came to look upon and treat the story as a boy's adventure tale, like any other boy's adventure tale. "Those are elements that the production will emphasize," he declared as rehearsals began in December of 1985, "and all of the audience should be able to relate to this." How he put this to practice is illustrated in the way Kauffman treated authentic Micronesian chants—only as a jumping-off point for artistic creation, not as historically accurate music to be copied from archival recordings.

Another problem confronting the director was the lack of theatre tradition in Micronesia. How would they respond to live actors when they had no models for audience behavior? With no native theatre, Micronesians asked Kauffman, "Is it like movies?" "TV?"

When the script was ready, Kauffman turned to the new job of taking American actors, some of whom had little experience on stage, and turning them into a group who would be believable playing Satawalese. The first week of rehearsal was given over to becoming acquainted with the culture. Cowell and Kauffman talked about

their trip and showed their pictures. They discussed navigation and the deep respect that they have for the people of Micronesia. Lino Olopai and his nephew from Saipan joined in the talk and demonstrations. The television special, *The Navigators: Pathfinders of the Pacific*, and documentaries of the island's peoples provided examples for actors' movements, gestures, vocal patterns, and dances.

Long discussions of the differences in nonverbal communication in the three cultures took up hours of rehearsal time. The way of carrying the weight of the body, the typical facial expression, the use of time, all had to be considered. Unfamiliar gestures had to be learned—how to measure the size of a fish on the arm, how to hold the hand over the mouth and giggle in embarrassment. The actors talked about how to deliver the common speech tag given by the islanders to most English questions, “Yano?” (Yah? No?) The actresses saw women in the archive files meeting their men on return from a long voyage with bites to their stomachs and frantic pummeling to the bodies. Would Hawaiian audiences understand such greetings? How should the love scene be played? Would a girl from the island be able to decode the moves of Gabby, a sophisticated teen who had just come from three years' exposure to “Magnum PI?” After such questions, more than one rehearsal ended with someone begging to see the films and video tapes again.

Song for the Navigator opened in the Hawaiian Islands early in 1986, where it met overwhelming enthusiasm from children, who especially responded to the chants and ghost scenes. The Honolulu newspaper reviews were mixed, but the crowds were enthusiastic. Teachers raved.

With much trepidation and excitement the troupe set out for the Western Pacific on February 5th, 1986. Though Kauffman had written extensive notes, he found that he had not checked on everything. He forgot to look up electrical sources, so the play had to be able to run sound cues live or off batteries. Kauffman also forgot to check on the customs of life in the men's boathouse. Since one scene was set there, he needed information about sleeping arrangements. Although it would not make much difference to American audiences, Kauffman knew that he could not violate major customs of Micronesia, or the play could become a laughing stock. As it was, Lino Olopai only told Kauffman just before the troupe left Hawaii that it would be shocking for the young lovers to hug each other after an exciting sea rescue or when they parted. Kauffman was grateful for the comment, and immediately changed the business to a delicate brush of the finger tips, rather than the full embrace that he had staged originally.

The first leg of the journey took the cast to Saipan. There at the airport the reception committee had flower crowns for everyone. Saipan is a land of dusty streets, two story buildings, and newspapers worn on the head to ward off the blistering sun. Here the audience sat—men, women, and children alike—giving the characteristic gesture that the actors had taken such pains to learn, a giggle behind a hand held to the mouth. On Yap the actors saw startling contrasts, such as a mother dressed in the classic tradition—nude to the waist—pushing her baby in a modern Sears stroller.

The troupe wondered if the gap between the cultures was too wide.

Then in Yap, an old chief came up to the managing director to congratulate her on HTY's performance. With a half-tap on her arm, and then taking both of the statuesque Campbell's hands in his, the short dignified leader looked squarely into her eyes and said, "You do a true thing." The whole project came together for Campbell with those words.

At first the Micronesians were shy about approaching the theatre. The Westerners on the island sat close to the stage, while those from Palau and Saipan sat far away. But as the action progressed, the people crept up to see and to hear more. By the third showing at any given spot, audiences were vying for the choice seats.

On the tiny island of Palau, the electric generator was scheduled to be turned off at 8:00 P.M.—the very hour of the last performance of the day. While Coleman lanterns and gas generators were being set up, an influential someone talked to the power plant authorities, and asked them to keep the electricity on for the duration of the performance. By some stroke of luck or persuasion, the lights lasted through the curtain call. The Hawaiians interpreted this as the ultimate compliment from the Micronesians, who on the troupe's arrival exchanged looks as if to say, "Oh, Lord, they came after all. How will we handle these crazed Houlies?" By the end of the tour, teenagers came up to the company and begged to learn how the actors knew about their local customs, especially their love for faluba, fermented sap from the coconut tree. "How do you know this? How did you know that?" they asked, "How did you know how we are?"

Hard on the return to Hawaii, the company left for a mainland tour to Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Dallas. In the five performances at the Kennedy Center in April, I found audiences fascinated by Micronesian. The opening chant in the play, which had put the Hawaiian audience in awe, and had drawn the Micronesians into the center of the crowd, caused giggles in Washington. In fact, the most consistent audience reaction in Washington was laughter and giggles along with a notable lack of talking and restless movement so often heard in theatre for youth.

At the April 22nd morning show where I took detailed notes of audience response, the crowd consisted mostly of fifth and sixth graders, with a smattering of seventh and eighth grade students. The actors had the young people intently engaged from the first moment of the action, following all the turns of the story as noted by the universal "Oh, oh's" as the island teenagers on stage flirted and teased.

The young audience used the energetic sailing scene where the grandfather takes Gabby's earring for a fishhook to wiggle, exchange comments, and feel the excitement of the open sea. A joyous outburst came after a Micronesian cousin tricked Gabby into mistaking a coconut for his girlfriend's cheek, "In America do all mens kiss coconut as good as you?" Charlotte Rath need not have wondered if the Micronesians' cruel jokes would play on the mainland.

The audience's reactions to the more serious parts of the play were not so easy to evaluate. When the teenagers talked, the audience listened in complete attention;

but when the old grandfather explained something to the audience, they wiggled and talked. Yet the serious dramatic scenes held the youth. They sat, all eyes on the stage, as the Aunty went into a mystical trance. At the close of the play, when the grandfather and boy say good-bye to each other tenderly, the audience sat without moving. When the old navigator disappeared into the waves for the last time, they gave a sharp cry of "Oh!" that rang through out the theatre. Loud screams and yells burst forth at the end of the piece. As one adult member of the audience said of the show, "This is truly what it is to get into someone else's culture."

Reactions in Seattle were not greatly different. Dallas youth enjoyed the pidgin English at the top of the play, and their characteristic rocking (a kind of wave), stopped for the duration of the production. One Texan said of the show, "We treasure family bonds in Texas, and because of this the play has particular resonance for Texans . . . In that sense the play is universal."

Much of the credit for the audience's ability to get into another culture was due to Kauffman's skillful directing. One of the images that Kauffman staged worked both to introduce a new culture and to make a dramatic statement. The tour necessitated a minimal set. Two giant waves and several logs made up most of the scenery, and the rest of the design consisted of costumed bodies and the audience's imagination. Kauffman gave each actor a home spot on the stage where actors rested between scenes, becoming a part of the set. Waiting bodies were a key image for the production, silently telling the audience that all people on an island are present at all times. No one can get away. Micronesians have to create a place for themselves on their island; and much of what Gabby had to learn was how to make a place for himself on the island of his heritage. As an artistic effect, the constant presence of the stoic faces and still bodies lent a mysterious air to even the most comic of scenes.

The director's job as an interpreter of cultures was made easier by playwright Cowell who included many scenes where characters explained an aspect of their lives to an uninitiated other. A tãro-making scene, a scene about McDonald's, a fishing scene, a discussion of the coming summer in Honolulu all helped to bridge the cultures. The translation of words and phrases became an unobtrusive part of the action of the play, providing a dramatic device which opened up an unknown world to audience members wherever the show played.

Kauffman said that one of his major problems in the directing of this play was that so little of the drama was based on conflict. He worried that the episodes did not offer enough excitement. To test this concern, I asked a group of young teens, as they came down on the elevator of the Kennedy Center, if I should see the play. They said, "Oh, yes! See it! It's good!"

"What's the best part?" I probed.

"It's all good! There is no one best part."

The director created involvement and excitement without the inclusion of overt conflict, which we so often believe necessary to hold a teenage audience weaned on the violence of television.

When the late John Kauffman came to Honolulu Theatre for Youth, he hoped to help the organization achieve its goal of becoming a truly multi-ethnic theatre. At no time was he more challenged or successful than in his work on *Song for the Navigator*. Under his tutelage the company learned, like the Micronesians, to sail their craft in both directions.