

IN CONVERSATION WITH **LEMI PONIFASIO**

Lemi Ponifasio is in high demand the world over. He has received international awards as a choreographer, designer, opera director, and for his theatre and dance works. In this article, Lemi talks with DANZ Chief Executive, Anton Carter.

With his company MAU, Lemi's work has been presented in over 30 countries including at the prestigious Avignon Festival, BAM and the Lincoln Center in New York, Theatre de la Ville Paris, Theatre of Nations Moscow, Berlin Festival, Vienna Festival, Edinburgh International Festival and the Venice Biennale.

This past year Lemi has toured the monumental work *I AM*, staged 1000 people in Toronto for the opera *Apocalypse*, and toured *Stones In Her Mouth*, and was nominated for two Bessie awards in New York for *Birds With Skymirror*. He created a new company MAU Mapuche with the indigenous people of Chile and won international production of the year for 2015, was invited by Director Okwui Enwezor as a visual artist to the 56th *Venice Biennale*, and made time to give lectures and work with communities. Critics compare him to visionaries Pina Bausch, Merce Cunningham and Robert Wilson. Like those luminaries, UNESCO is celebrating Lemi and his work with a special ceremony in Paris where he will give the message for International Dance Day on 29 April 2016.

What is your message?

It is a great honour and I'm humbled to be a messenger. Dance is life in the quiver. Like karakia it interweaves the whakapapa of all existence, so my message is a dance karakia. I grew up in Samoa where dance is an uncontrollable activation of joy. Dance is the personification of joy, the joy of life, the joy of being with each other.

We are in the midst of dramatic changes in our world, religious and political fundamentalism, terrorism, economic crisis, technology overdrive, nuclear armament, climate chaos, mass migration and the colossal force of displaced people, refugees. People are divided. What is dance within this setting? What is humanity? What is



APOCALYPSIS R.M.SCHAFFER, WORLD PREMIERE LUMINATO FESTIVAL 2015
PHOTO: MAU

dance on Earth? What is it to be with each other? My message carries the aims of my work and a perspective from Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific.

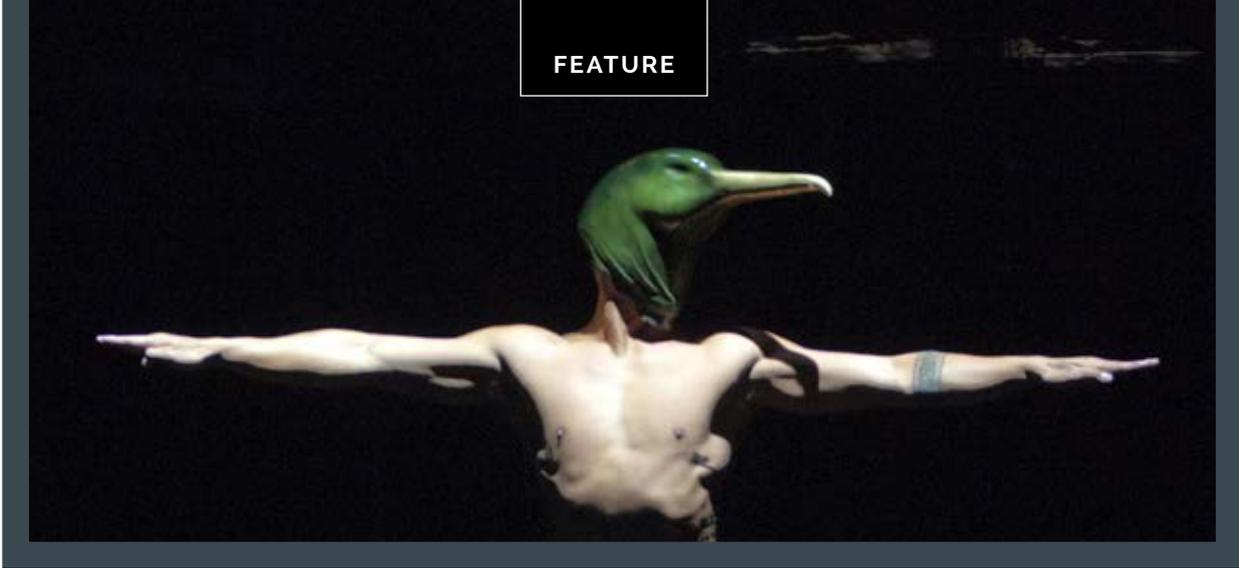
MAU is 21 this year; tell us about MAU since its inception in 1995?

MAU is the name I give to the work I do and the different communities I work with. MAU means the declaration of truth. The only beauty that counts is one that is true. MAU is not just stage work but how we practice life and who we can become as people and as community. Sometimes we fall far too short of who we can be and that is why creation exists. It helps us recover our lives, it's our second chance.

Over the years, MAU has collaborated with thousands of people, working on marae, in schools, universities, on Pacific islands, in factories, opera houses, castles, galleries, and stadiums. The work has included fully staged operas, theatre, dance, exhibitions, and also festivals and forums for the community about what is important to them - where people can simply sit next to each other and have a meal, a chat or complex discussion.

Conversations between politicians, activists, refugees, the young, the old - about many issues from the artistic and philosophical to political, economic, human rights, women, children, environmental activities.

Community is living with a sense of finding our common unity. The MAU movement has established its ideals through working with many communities. There's no formula or easy way to work and you have to find pathways in every situation that allow a shift in what people are doing. Amazing, it's been 21 years and we are still living and working from NZ.



For almost two decades your work has been co-produced by the world's major presenters. How does this happen?

I decided that the origin of my dance has to be born from the cosmic vision of Māori and the Pacific. I was born from this DNA. In the beginning my focus was working with local communities, marae and travelling the Pacific region collaborating with different islands and people.

Peter Sellars, who was the director of the Venice Theatre Biennale at the time, called and said I had to come. That was the first major decision to travel away from the Pacific with MAU. Since then we have become part of the conversation at the same table with some of the most important artists, thinkers and critics of today.

Creation is a shared vision. Ordinary producers book shows, great producers invest in fulfilling your potential as an artist. The people who co-produce my work are faithful to the vision we continue to work together on.

To be invited to the Venice Biennale three times is unprecedented. What work did you create for the 56th International Art Exhibition last year?

The work is called 'Lagimoana', based on the Samoan falelalagi - the house of women, where women do their work, learn to be mothers, weave, gossip, discuss their community and socialise away from men. Women are builders of the human DNA. The work is about the collapse of empires. It now goes to the KunstFestSpiele in Hannover in May collaborating with Syrian women refugees, artists and writers. These courageous women continue to create and write while eyewitnesses to the terrible human disaster taking place in Europe.

With your profile in the world, what support do you get from New Zealand?

It is widely presumed, here and abroad, that MAU is funded by NZ like the Royal New Zealand Ballet, because of the work we make, the size of our company and our presence internationally. But no, we are like any other independent artists who apply to Creative New Zealand for

project funding. We compete with everyone for support. Sometimes we get funding for which I'm very grateful, and sometimes not.

What would be the ideal?

For nearly 20 years MAU has been the most prolific company from NZ working internationally. So, you can imagine the challenge of holding a company of this size together.

Most companies working like us internationally depend on support from their governments. Income from touring and commissions for new work are not enough to finance the infrastructure needed by a company working this way. It's dangerous to work this way because you are expected to keep delivering at the highest level, without the same level of support.

My priority is to care for the people I work with. This is paramount because of the trust and hope placed on me by everyone including their families and their communities. MAU is a school, its youth development and education, Māori and Pacific heritage arts, dance and art and philosophy and culture, and it is a social movement. Working this way is about respect, artistic development, personal development, fulfilling the potential of artists, of people and it's also livelihood. These are the essentials that are always under threat because of the size of the task and the lack of resources. Without ambition we have mediocrity. It's not easy to fit this into a dance funding box.

How do you see the New Zealand contemporary dance and performing arts scene?

Contemporary dance in NZ is in the lineage of Anglo-American dance. We can label it NZ dance, Pacific dance, Māori dance and there was a time when that was needed but now it comes across only as branding because the work has not been able to break from traditional contemporary dance forms. Contemporary is the moment-ness of our lives, not a dance style. We need to continue to find new forms. I feel the same about NZ theatre.



MAU MAPUCHE, WORLD PREMIERE SANTIAGO A MIL FESTIVAL 2016 / PHOTO: MAU



I AM, WORLD PREMIERE AVIGNON FESTIVAL 2014 / PHOTO: MAU

We have more dance and performing arts schools and people calling themselves dancers and actors. We now have well educated dancers and artists with degrees. But we need visionary wilful creators who can forge new directions and forms and live their work.

Compared to the heavy artistic accountability, intellectual and critical engagement in Europe, for example, dance and theatre in NZ lacks this complexity.

We need more shamans, poets, philosophers, tohunga, prophets and rebels.

Perhaps we organise our arts and funding policies too much within the requirements of the arts industry where creative motivation becomes financial, and works are oriented towards box office appeal. This condition is aggressively against reflection and creation.

Curiously, there are so many works made here under 60 minutes. Do performers lack fitness or a lack mastery? A symphony, a ballet is not 15 minutes. War and Peace, the Bible, Tristan and Isolde, the Mahabharata are not ten pages. Art has to be a challenge, a pilgrimage for the people. We are not nurturing audiences but grooming consumers. We are grooming business people, not artists.

How is New Zealand dance internationally?

New Zealand dance has low artistic seriousness. NZ cannot hold its own alongside the work of international artists. The work may be entertaining, charming and have local marketability but serious arts presenters are not looking for entertainment. They are looking for art. Important producers come to NZ every year during the festivals but do not invite NZ works to any significant place.

We need to develop knowledge and care about the arts field itself. What is it? What is happening intellectually? Where are we heading? How do we lead the world? What are we contributing to the conversation? Ideas - not just selling a show or touring.

Overblown PR might have you believed that we have conquered the world. That may be so on a personal

level. Why are our fully funded companies on the street hustling for audiences at an international arts festival's fringe programme? We can't develop our artists through pretence and marketing. Art is not a market. Working internationally is about leadership in the world.

What is the way forward for dance and theatre in New Zealand?

We need more art. If we want a dynamic artistic scene here as well as international success, we need to create the conditions that support dance and theatre creators and their risk-taking. This can be encouraged by our funding policies and the critique of art, creative space and audience development based on a critical public that enters into a dialogue with the arts.

The arts industry reduces artists to entertainers and re-formulates the concept of 'creative' within business strategies, targets and marketing. Risk is seen only as financial, not intellectual. The relationship of the artist and audience becomes that of supplier and consumer, not one of mutual creativity.

The danger of framing arts within a business model is that government can be freed from its responsibility to fund art for art because the value of art is replaced by a business venture. Art as business is an unworkable model that enslaves the artist financially. When an artist doesn't make money, they can be censured, without considering the value of their work with the value of the investment.

New Zealand needs to trust the artist. Support artists who lead through the excellence of their work, not just by ticking boxes. This includes artists who don't work within an arts industry model. Political correctness is also holding us back.

The artist must be here to incite truth and beauty in our world. Let's not create a safe zone that encourages mediocrity because we are fearful of the truth. Artists are in danger of losing their original vision, their creation process and context. If we lose our art, we lose our humanity. ■