Aesthetics, Affect and Applied Theatre

Wan Smolbag Theatre and the Development of Vanuatu

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing the thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Rebekah Woodward
Abstract

During the last 10-15 years, a great deal of scholarship has appeared on the topics of “applied theatre” and “theatre for development”, two of the more commonly used umbrella terms for theatre practices that are associated with relatively explicit social objectives in areas such as education, health, human rights and environmental awareness. Much of the research in this field has focused narrowly on monitoring and evaluation, with a view to establishing empirical evidence for the efficacy of applied theatre practices. However, some scholars and practitioners have recently called for more attention to be paid to the aesthetics of their performances, arguing that these are inextricably linked with any intended development outcomes. Taking up this challenge, this thesis asks: If aesthetics (as everyday uses of the word often imply) have something to do with the appreciation of artistic forms, then where is an audience's sensitivity to such forms generated in the first place? When theatre is resonant, what are the other cultural practices with which it is resonating? When audiences want to participate, what are the forms of participation for which their culture has helped to prepare them, and to which the theatre makers must orient themselves, in order to have any hope of engaging them?

In pursuing this line of questioning I conducted six weeks of ethnographic participant-observation on the rehearsals and performances of a “big play” called Zero Balans, staged by Wan Smolbag Theatre (WSB). WSB is a major Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) located in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, and arguably the longest running Theatre for Development (TfD) initiative in the region. It operates not only in purpose-built theatre settings, but also brings performances to schools and villages, popular radio and TV, as well as developing
grassroots programmes in youth, health, education, the environment and good governance. While all their projects warrant attention, and are considered in the thesis, the big play proved particularly useful as a stimulus for research into the questions surrounding aesthetics because, on the surface, it flouts two dominant ideas in the TfD field. These two ideas being the preference for process-oriented participatory work and the perceived benefits of pressing local, indigenous cultural forms into the service of educational and developmental goals.

The thesis argues that WSB successfully meld more-or-less conventional mainstream Western theatre aesthetics with a Melanesian sensibility in accordance with a shifting, contemporary Melanesian context. On the one hand, these forms have been sufficiently adapted as to recall many characteristics of “traditional” ni-Vanuatu cultural practices. On the other hand, they remain sufficiently “foreign” as to allow WSB to mount a sometimes very direct critique of social issues. In this way, WSB’s work fits with a wider pattern of cultural renewal and innovation that we can trace across other artforms in the country. The thesis also argues that, despite WSB—in their big plays—eschewing the most commonly adopted forms of process-based participatory theatre (playback, forum, et cetera), the big plays can still be understood as highly charged, emotional, affective, embodied, intercorporeal, engagements; because rather than seeking merely formal features of participation, WSB has worked effectively for many years to build from the bottom up, creating and sustaining long-term relationships.

Taken together, the arguments of the thesis suggest that we need to enlarge our understanding of what we mean by participatory theatre and encourages greater experimentation with “non-canonical” applied theatre forms. To support these
endeavours, the field needs more ethnographic studies; studies, which not only identify the variety of forms that applied theatre can take in different locations, but also model for TfD practitioners who work in these different locations, the deep forms of engagement which must occur upstream of performances, namely the building of relationships.
Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Abu, the late grandfather of Wan Smolbag Theatre Company. Abu bestowed a bounty of warmth and generosity upon me during my time with the NGO, and when I finished my fieldwork, we decided to be pen pals. Unfortunately this friendship was cut short by his sudden passing. So, Abu, think of this thesis as a comprehensive letter that catches you up on my last few years and details the many things I learnt from you and from your “family”.

I would especially like to thank my supervisors Dr. Paul Dwyer and Dr. Laura Ginters for their guidance and support. Thank you to Paul for investing into this work, and me, and for introducing me to a world that I have become increasingly passionate about. It was such a joy to be part of the Department of Performance Studies and its community: the Friday afternoon post-graduate seminars, which were always fascinating and inspiring, the Friday night post-seminar seminars at the “Flodge” and the publication group, led by Dr. Glen McGillivray.

I would also like to thank Anne Cochrane and Dorothy Dewar for their assistance in translating parts of the *Zero Balans* play script from Bislama into English. Thank you again to Anne, my mother Sharon Hanna and Lydia Woolley for your great interest in the thesis, your encouragement and your feedback. Thank you to my husband Michael for being a firm foundation and the supplier of good New Zealand Pinot Noir.

Most of all, my deepest thanks to Wan Smolbag Theatre, particularly Peter Walker, Joanne Dorras and the members of Wan Smolbag Theatre Company and *Helt Fors*, for graciously allowing me to observe the rehearsals and performances of *Zero*
Balans. I could not begin to tell you how wonderful you all are and what outstanding work you do in Vanuatu and the wider Pacific.

As I write the concluding words to this thesis, Cyclone Pam has devastated Vanuatu; destroying homes, villages, fishing vessels, forests, crops and livestock. May Australia, New Zealand and other countries be ever more generous towards this island nation as it recovers and as its people rebuild their lives. I have no doubt that they will come out of this hardship stronger than ever.
A Note on Sources

The work presented in this thesis is my own. Where I have drawn on the work of individuals and institutions, I have done so in accordance with the required citation conventions. Unless indicated, the quotations attributed to the participants in my ethnographic fieldwork have been de-identified. All quotations attributed to the participants are included with their consent as per the requirements of research protocol approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

The content of this thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my higher research degree candidature at the University of Sydney. Some of this research, in an earlier form, has been published during this process:

### Abbreviations Regularly Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>AusAID</td>
<td>Australian Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFAT</td>
<td>Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>GO</td>
<td>Government Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPH</td>
<td>Kam Pusum Hed (Drop-in Centre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M&amp;E</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NITV</td>
<td>National Indigenous Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZAid</td>
<td>New Zealand Aid Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PIPP</td>
<td>Pacific Institute of Public Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG</td>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmissible Infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TfD</td>
<td>Theatre for Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>TO</td>
<td>Theatre of the Oppressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USP</td>
<td>University of the South Pacific</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCC</td>
<td>Vanuatu Cultural Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>VNSO</td>
<td>Vanuatu National Statistics Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSA</td>
<td>Volunteer Service Abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VWC</td>
<td>Vanuatu Women’s Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSB</td>
<td>Wan Smolbag Theatre</td>
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Carto GIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

Figure 2. Map of Efate, Vanuatu
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Prologue

May 7th, 2011

Port Vila, Vanuatu

Six-fifteen on a Saturday night. The humidity refuses to lift. My face melts in the dark. The “bus” I am sitting in—a clapped-out Toyota HiAce—squeaks and bounces over the last, potholed stretch of road leading up to Wan Smolbag Haos. I stand up, lean forward and place 150 vatu into the driver’s hand. “Tangkyu tumas!” I sing as I turn to wrestle open the sliding door. Yank. Scrape. Thud. “Mothe.” I jump down, slam the door shut and step past a long line of people who are queuing up at the “box-office”—a rickety, wooden table manned by two young adults with a metal change tin. Inside, the theatre is already packed.

Designed to seat about 150 people comfortably, the theatre struggles to accommodate an ever-expanding crowd that overflows from the chairs to the stairs. On each level of the seating bank, an extra row of spectators is squeezed into what would ordinarily be legroom for the spectators on chairs. At the very front of the rostra a final row of spectators spills onto grass mats that creep forward into the stage space. Body parts touch. Two large ceiling fans and six ordinary fans, which have been relocated from desktops and screwed onto the walls, fight with the heat. The open side-doors beckon in vain for some breeze to come in. A couple of wise women flap their fans. I take off my sandshoes, place them on the edge of a mat and weave through the children to find a spot in the corner. There is hardly any space to wriggle or change which leg to lean on. A full forty minutes remain until the
scheduled start of the show. What happened to the laid-back nonchalance and loose deadlines of so-called “Melanesian time”? Pins and needles are already setting in…

Mercifully, the wait is cut short as the company yields to the presence and gentle pressure applied by its eager anticipatory audience. The side doors to the theatre are shut. The crowd of would-be spectators still waiting outside is sent home. The house lights dim. Smoke machines start. Twelve actors walk through the mist, stand strong and burst into song. For the next two hours, this audience of which I am a part—this tight gathering of bodies, this commingling of affect, this swarm of being—responds energetically and automatically to all that happens on stage: whistling, whispering, oohing, aahing, shrieking, laughing loudly, giggling with hands over mouths, tutting, shushing, yelling and even speaking to the actors. Whatever else is going on as part of this event, there is no denying that we, as an audience, are fully engaged in the performance.

And this pattern is repeated three, four, five times a week for two months. On Saturday nights, fire dancers perform on the grounds outside the theatre for those who have missed out on a seat. At interval, spectators sometimes chat with the performers or donate a few coins and enjoy the sugared juice and cake brought forth by Wan Smolbag Theatre staff and volunteers. By the end of the season, the cast and crew of Zero Balans will have performed their play to a combined audience of four and half thousand people, equivalent to ten per cent of the population of Port Vila, the capital and largest town of Vanuatu. At a time when some of the most culturally prestigious, subsidised theatre companies in Australia, New Zealand and other “Western” nations are constantly struggling to regenerate and expand the base of their ageing subscriber audiences, Wan Smolbag Theatre is performing to audience
members of all ages, from peri-urban slums to gated establishments. In short, this is mass, popular entertainment. Yet, it is also a theatre that is vitally engaged in the great social and political questions of the audience's lives and arguably the most successful, long-term example of theatre for development in the Pacific region.

Why do these spectators come to Wan Smolbag Theatre en masse? Why do they engage with the performances in such open and unrestrained ways? What forms of reciprocation occur within these engagements? What kinds of effect do the performances have upon all involved?
Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis focuses on questions of aesthetics, participation and cultural relevance in the theatre for development (TfD) practice of Wan Smolbag Theatre. Wan Smolbag (or WSB) is a major Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu and arguably the longest-running TfD initiative in the region. As will become clearer in the following chapter, the designation “theatre for development” is a difficult term to define (and, indeed, is not the term most commonly used by WSB’s members themselves). Broadly speaking, however, the work of WSB can be characterised as a form of “applied theatre” (another contested term) in the sense that they work not only in purpose-built theatre settings but also in schools, villages and ceremonial meeting houses, as well as making programmes for popular radio and television. All of these theatrical activities are complemented by non-theatre-based initiatives to support the needs of young people, to promote health and education, environmental awareness and good governance.

The difficulty of naming this kind of practice is, in itself, revealing. It suggests that, rather than cohering around a readily identifiable core set of formal concerns or genre conventions, the practice is held together more by virtue of its location at the intersections of many different fields of social practice (the arts, education, welfare, politics, et cetera). Much of the funding for this kind of practice comes from non-arts agencies and donors. Not surprisingly, given this context, the aesthetics of applied theatre work are often given little consideration in the methods of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) or Impact Assessment that dominate a lot of the research in the applied theatre area (Chinyowa, 2011; Etherton & Prentki, 2006; Baños Smith,
2006). This is not to deny the importance of M&E style research. After all, many thousands of dollars of taxpayer funds and donations are involved in a context where there is intense pressure on governments and within donor organisations to justify spending. Furthermore, over twenty years of M&E have enabled WSB to prove their reliability and ethical standards with respect to programming and budgeting, creating a strong, ongoing partnership with their now main funders, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the New Zealand Aid Programme (NZAid).

Although theatre practitioners sometimes bemoan M&E style research, ironically these studies are at least consistent with the tendency among practitioners themselves to promote applied theatre principally on the grounds of its notional efficacy as a tool for promoting social change. Nevertheless, a number of applied theatre scholars over the last decade, and even some non-arts funding agencies, have begun to place more emphasis on the aesthetics of applied theatre work. This emphasis includes not only arguing for assessments to recognise the artistic and aesthetic processes within TFD and applied theatre performances, but also for the performances themselves to seriously consider and utilise further the kind of enhancing engagement aesthetics provides. As Anthony Jackson asserts:

> [A]t its best, theatre that aims to educate or influence can truly do so only if it values entertainment, the artistry and craftsmanship that are associated with resonant, powerful theatre, and the aesthetic qualities that—by definition—will appeal to our senses...[E]ven in the most proactive interventionist

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1 In 2013, the newly elected Australian government merged AusAID with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). In New Zealand, the International Development Group (IDG) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) manages NZAid.
the theatre, the aesthetic dimension of that work is pivotal. Lose sight of the
aesthetic and the *capacity* of such theatre to intervene is seriously
diminished. (2007, pp. 27-28; italics in the original)

Jackson makes a cogent, powerful argument in defence of aesthetics but at the same
time raises a number of critical questions, which my research seeks to address. If
aesthetics (as everyday uses of the word often imply) have something to do with the
appreciation of artistic forms, then where is an audience's sensitivity to such forms
generated in the first place? When theatre is “resonant”, what are the other cultural
practices with which it is resonating? When audiences want to participate, what are
the forms of participation for which their culture has helped to prepare them, and to
which the theatre makers must orient themselves, in order to have any hope of
engaging them?

In pursuing this line of questioning, I conducted six weeks of ethnographic
participant-observation on the rehearsals and performances of Zero Balans,
performed by the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company and the WSB *Helt Fors* (Health
Force) team in Port Vila. Zero Balans was an example of what the company calls a
“big play”, distinguished by its scale of production from the many smaller, often
more obviously didactic, shows that go out on tour and play to village audiences
across Vanuatu. While the “big plays” occupy a quite particular place in WSB’s work
and need to be carefully contextualised in the light of other WSB activities, they do
provide a particularly useful stimulus for research into the key questions of this
thesis. This is because, on the surface of it, a play like Zero Balans flouts two
dominant ideas in the TfD field: firstly, the preference for process-oriented
participatory work, and secondly, the perceived benefits of integrating local, indigenous cultural forms into the service of educational and developmental goals.

The preference for process-oriented participatory work developed from popular theatre practitioners and non-formal educators in the 1960s and ‘70s who saw theatre as a tool for consciousness-raising in marginalised and oppressed communities. The key to such a practice was to empower the audience by, literally, giving them a sense of agency in the performance, with the hope that the audience would carry actions rehearsed in the theatre across into real-life situations and thus instigate reformist, or indeed revolutionary, social change. The work of Augusto Boal is of course exemplary in this regard and his “Theatre of the Oppressed” techniques remain a staple of TfD practice. Having said this, it is also the case that some scholar-practitioners are more circumspect about the extent to which such participation can deliver all that is usually promised (Balfour, 2009; Etherton & Prentki, 2006; Nicholson, 2005). Others have noticed a gradual over-reliance on forms such as Boal’s “forum theatre” to generate particular kinds of participation, in turn limiting the scope of how the term is defined and delegitimising other alternative, perhaps equally effective, practices (Rahnema, 2009; Thompson, 2009).

This mantra of participation is sometimes allied with a concern that TfD is likely to be more effective when it makes use of appropriate indigenous cultural forms. Scholar-practitioners like David Kerr write enthusiastically about harnessing such forms within TfD for their “multi-layered performance techniques and motifs” (2009, p. 101). These techniques and motifs, it is believed, are well suited to help address the social and cultural complexities of particular issues faced by local communities insofar as they discourage superficial didacticism within the
Although the practical implications of such beliefs are sometimes contentious, it is safe to say that many, if not most, scholar-practitioners are critical of mechanistic misappropriations of traditional forms and, on the flipside, are sceptical about incorporating dominant Western theatrical forms into TFD performances. As I will be arguing in this thesis, Zero Balans—and the WSB big plays in general—seem anomalous in this regard. They involve an indigenous appropriation of more-or-less conventional, mainstream Western aesthetic forms that problematises the binary opposition (local and indigenous forms versus Western imports) that often characterises debates about cross-cultural practice.

As noted above, a number of scholars writing on applied theatre and TFD have sought to redress the focus on M&E research—aimed at measuring impact and efficacy in a narrow way—and expand it by turning towards the aesthetics of the performance. This seems a salutary move, although it is far from a straightforward argument. The legacy of Immanuel Kant's approach to defining aesthetics—to which some scholars have had recourse—is problematic in a number of important ways. For one thing, it implies a distanced, detached contemplation of beautiful things and a universality of response. The limitations of Kant's framework have prompted scholars to look for alternatives. One such move includes a turn to what we might think of as the affective, embodied aspects of our response to aesthetic experiences. As James Thompson explains, affect "is connected both to a capacity for action and to a sense of aliveness, where it is that vitality that prompts a person's desire to connect and engage (perhaps with others and ideas)" (2009, p. 119). In further contrast to Kantian aesthetics, anthropologists, social psychologists and social constructionist researchers have argued that the affective process within a person is
conditioned by their life experience and the socio-cultural structures within which they have grown up with and live (Wetherell, 2012).

The challenge then is to understand not simply the formal, aesthetic properties of artworks and performances, which are privileged by particular audiences in particular cultural settings, but also to understand where an audience’s feeling for form comes from in the first place. Here, I draw on the work of Clifford Geertz who famously argued that art manifests from “the matrix of sensibility” (1976, p. 1481) of a collective of human beings. According to Geertz, this sensibility stretches as “wide as social existence and as deep” (1976, p. 1478) and is informed by all facets of collective experience, from politics, economics and religion right across to eating, sleeping and housing situations.

The implications of adopting a Geertzian perspective on the key theoretical questions of this thesis include a number of important methodological considerations. In the first place, it indicates that the methodology must have the capacity to not only recognise the formal, aesthetic properties of Zero Balans but also the sensibility underpinning them. It would also suggest that the methodology must be able to identify the sensibility in other aspects of Port Vila life. Lastly, it would recognise that the methodology needs to be sensitive to how the company, audience, other WSB staff and volunteers and general public participate with the aesthetic forms—sensorially, emotionally, physically and verbally—and be able to identify this in other forms of participation within the city. Hence, as an embodied, anthropological practice, ethnographic participant-observation became the primary research methodology for this thesis, particularly in the rehearsals and performances of Zero Balans at the WSB Port Vila base. This participant-observation
was then complemented by in-depth interviews with several members of the company, participation in other WSB activities, a critical analysis of WSB resources and reports, and, equally importantly, living with a family of six ni-Vanuatu people, all of whom were unaffiliated with the NGO. The research materials I gathered during this time, especially on aesthetics and artistic craftsmanship, had not previously received any extensive scholarly attention, yet what I was finding appeared to complement the research from various reports on the NGO made by AusAID and NZAid and by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The findings also appeared to complement the work of Ian Gaskell and Robin Taylor (2004, 2007) concerning the efficacy of the WSB “small plays” and Robyn Drysdale (2014) on the role Love Patrol plays in HIV awareness across the Pacific.

Before giving a detailed overview of the structure of the thesis, I will now offer some preliminary background information on WSB, particularly in order to provide a context against which the critical review of Tfd (in Chapter Two) may be read. In 1989, fifteen volunteer actors began Wan Smolbag Theatre, performing short development plays in the streets, villages and schools of Vanuatu. Either pre-scripted or semi-improvised, these plays revolved around a central theme that would be taken up further in discussions with audiences at the end of each performance (or in some cases during performance). The name for the group came from the “one small bag” in which the actors used to carry around their props and costumes. Indeed, still today, the residents of Port Vila tend to refer to the NGO as just “Smolbag”. While the NGO’s name may have been colloquially shortened, its reach and activities certainly have not. The NGO now employs over 120 full-time and part-time staff with over 400 volunteers. The theatrical repertoire has extended from the small, travelling plays to
10 big plays, over 35 films and radio plays and a television soap series called *Love Patrol*, which airs across the Pacific. While the NGO is best known for its performance work, over the last 25 years the research underpinning these performances, together with the social energy they generate among community audiences, has helped fuel the development of ancillary, non-theatrical initiatives. These include the establishment of *yut sentas* (youth centres) and sexual health clinics in three islands, sports leagues, a turtle monitoring network, a nutrition centre and a publications centre which produces Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials. Both the performance work and these other ongoing initiatives together play a role in WSB’s long-term vision of a “sustainable and well-governed Vanuatu where women, men and young men and women participate in and contribute to their community’s development” (AusAID, 2009, p. 1).

While WSB’s radio, film and television work has toured widely, the company remains firmly based in Vanuatu, an incredibly diverse country of islands located in the Oceanic region and part of the Melanesian sub-region. These 70 to 80 islands of varying geographies contain a population of 234,023 (Vanuatu National Statistics Office [VNSO] 2009, p. 3) and just over 100 languages (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 1).³ Initially, before colonisation, the archipelago consisted of many autonomous Melanesian (and sometimes Polynesian) villages. In 1906 the British and French

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² The number of islands changes with each source: “approximately 83 inhabited and uninhabited islands” (Forsyth, 2009, p. xvii); “[a]bout 80 islands and reefs, some 70 of which are inhabited” (Morgan 2006, p. 118); “more than eighty islands and islets” (Garanger, 1996, p. 8); and “some 80 islands” (Philibert, 1981, p. 317).

³ Lynch and Crowley write that the most widely quoted figure is 105 languages (2001, p. 1), and on a tour of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre my guide explained that 110 languages were left, but soon this will fall to 100, as only one or two people know certain languages (Personal communication, May 7, 2011). See Crowley & Lynch for the many variables contributing towards the “lack of agreement amongst [linguistic] specialists” for an exact figure (2001, p. 1).
governments established the area as a condominium called the New Hebrides. With independence in 1980, a resurgence of kastom\(^4\) sprung forth, both in an effort to unite the islands as a nation and to reclaim and preserve cultural practices that had been lost or affected in some degree by colonisation. Hence, although the country operates under the Westminster system of governance with a state legal system, the kastom system remains a strong force in how its indigenous people live their lives, including in their management of conflict-resolution. In this environment, the indigenous people of the archipelago, the ni-Vanuatu (meaning of or born in Vanuatu\(^5\)), have an uncanny ability to operate in a world of pluralities and this is reflected not just within governance but also in their spirituality, economy and languages, to mention just a few relevant concerns. This ability has proven useful—and indeed necessary—in interactions and negotiations with the outside world. For, as the former colonisers left the nation in a poor state of affairs, it became necessary for the new government to acquire foreign aid, development and investment in order to run. While improvements have been made, the developing country still relies heavily upon foreign assistance across many sectors. Some of the problems the country faces include the increasing wave of urban migration and the pressure it places on infrastructure and housing, mass unemployment of educated and semi-educated youth, land tenure difficulties, political corruption and gender violence. These are all issues which WSB raises in Zero Balans and which are targeted hands-on in other grassroots initiatives of the NGO.

\(^4\) In Bislama (a form of Pidgin English with some French idioms, one of the national languages of Vanuatu) the term kastom does not merely translate to custom or tradition. Anthropologist Jean Mitchell refers to kastom as "the hybrid set of discourses and practices that encompass the cultural knowledge, sociality, and the social processes that are unique to ni-Vanuatu" (2011, p. 37). Miranda Forsyth also explains that kastom "generally [means] 'our way of doing things'" (2009, p. 95).

\(^5\) Crowley defines ni-Vanuatu as a "Vanuatu citizen [especially someone of Melanesian descent rather than a naturalised expatriate]" (2003, p. 191; brackets in the original).
Turning now to the structure of the thesis, this introductory chapter will be followed by two background chapters that, together, provide a context within which to view the ethnographic reflections on rehearsals and performances of *Zero Balans*. The first of these background chapters, Chapter Two, expands on the theoretical and methodological framework I have briefly sketched above and through which the rehearsals and performances are analysed. It begins by tracing some of the social, cultural and political factors that contributed towards the emergence of applied theatre, with specific reference to TfD. It further traces the foundations for some of the overriding principles most applied/TfD practitioners subscribe to, namely: a rhetoric of transformation, a preoccupation with process-oriented participatory practices, a quest for culturally relevant forms and, in more recent years, a concern with artistic quality and aesthetic engagement. The critical analysis of these principles leads into a discussion of the methodology underpinning my research.

Chapter Three begins with a fuller overview of WSB and *Zero Balans*. It details the NGO’s attributes, initiatives and approaches, including its own relationship with its main donors, AusAID and NZAid. The chapter then aims to orient the reader with respect to understanding contemporary Port Vila and the diversity of the country in which WSB works. It does this by giving a brief history of the capital and the archipelago, concentrating on the multiple migrations made to this corner of the world and subsequent social, cultural and political changes. This chapter considers the role of *kastom*, both in the past and in present-day Vanuatu. It then explores the thematic terrain negotiated in *Zero Balans* that has a particular resonance for a ni-Vanuatu audience: issues to do with urban migration, land tenure, political corruption, the *Wantok System*, gender inequality and youth unemployment. Finally,
this chapter considers the politics of aid and development within the country and
the complexities of Vanuatu’s relationship to foreign donors, particularly Australia,
the country’s largest source of donations and investment capital.

The next two chapters deal in detail with the discoveries made from the
ethnographic research. Building from the theoretical framework provided in Chapter
Two and the knowledge of Chapter Three, Chapter Four details the kinds of
participation occurring in the rehearsals and performances of Zero Balans. More
specifically, it describes and analyses what occurs between the audience and the
stage in performances; the effects of these interactions; the creating and rehearsing
process; and the performers’ interactions with each other, the rest of the WSB
community and the community at large. I argue that Zero Balans provides an
intensely participatory theatre experience while eschewing more familiar modes of
participatory applied theatre practice.

In Chapter Five, I argue that these high levels of audience engagement in Zero Balans
stem, in part, from the ways in which the performances resonated with a host of
other cultural practices one encounters in Port Vila. This chapter suggests how WSB
successfully melds more-or-less conventional mainstream Western theatre
aesthetics with a Melanesian sensibility.

Overall, the aim of this thesis is to make a case for understanding the aesthetics of
applied theatre in terms of “local knowledge” (Geertz, 1976). As I discuss in Chapter
Six, the performances of WSB play to, as well as sometimes play against, the
sensibilities that the audience members bring with them from many domains of
social practice, not just from the codes and conventions associated with art. For
applied theatre practitioners, this points to the need for a more expansive definition
of participation and more openness to experiment with “non-canonical” forms of applied theatre.
Chapter 2: Efficacy, Aesthetics and Affect: The Challenges of Theorising and Researching Applied Theatre and Theatre for Development

Introduction

As emphasised in the introduction, applied theatre is not so much a genre as it is a loose amalgam of practices and principles relevant to theatre work across a whole range of (mostly) non-theatrical settings including schools, prisons, rest homes, hospitals, villages and refugee camps. While the term “applied theatre” gained currency through the 1990s (Nicholson, 2005, p. 2), the sources of much of this work lie in earlier decades of highly contested social, political and cultural change. In this chapter, I briefly review some key elements of this history—particularly insofar as theatre for development work is concerned—in order to sketch the foundations for some of the overriding principles to which many, if not most, applied/TfD practitioners would subscribe. These principles include an aspiration towards socio-political efficacy (Kershaw, 1992), a pre-occupation with process-oriented participatory modes of practice, and a preference for aesthetic forms that arise from, or can be rendered harmonious with, local cultural frameworks. At the end of the chapter, I explain how a desire to examine these foundational issues in greater detail influenced the choice of an ethnographic approach to my research project. I briefly outline what this methodology entails and introduce the immediate context for the fieldwork (six weeks of rehearsal and performance observations with Wan Smolbag Theatre Company) ahead of a more detailed discussion of the wider socio-cultural and political context in Chapter Three.
The Contradictions of Development

Arguably, the beginnings of “development” as a key theme of international relations can be traced back to two major shifts in the post-WWII era. On the one hand, coinciding with the official formation of the United Nations in 1945 and their adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, we see the emergence of a human rights discourse that remains highly prominent, albeit controversial, in contemporary international relations. Setting aside the debates around whether or not a universalising human rights discourse can speak to the complexities of social contestation in all cultures (Bell, Nathan & Pelege, 2001; Rae, 2009), it is worth noting how easily this discourse can slide into an “us versus them”, “top-down” view of the world. In his inaugural address to the United Nations, in 1949, the US President Harry S. Truman articulated the challenge of human rights as follows:

More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of the people. (Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, 2013, para. 45)

While this concern with poverty alleviation remains commendable, the language Truman employs does show traces of a paternalistic outlook. Moreover, he links human rights discourse and the goals of development with a politics of modernisation which, in practice, has often focused on opening up developing countries to a world economy dominated by the interests of multinational
corporations that are seeking, above all else, access to cheap labour, minerals and other primary resources.

On the other hand, we can relate the emergence of development as a key theme in international relations to the political struggles for independence and decolonisation that were waged across much of Africa and Asia in the post-WWII era. Although the United States supported these processes of liberation, the left-leaning governments in many of the new nations that emerged as a result were also perceived (indeed, are still often perceived) by the US and other major Western powers to be a threat to their strategic interests (including the business interests of the multinational corporations referred to above); hence, there has been a history of counter-revolutionary right-wing dictatorships that have held sway in much of Africa and Latin America with support from the West.

If we fast-forward now to the early 21st century, it is not too difficult to see how some of the historic shifts and tensions in geo-political relations described above are still relevant to aid and development programmes in the Oceania region (including theatre and culture-based initiatives). Pacific Island nations regularly complain of what they call the “boomerang aid” that comes from Australia: vast amounts of the funding for development assistance that comes through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade effectively comes back in the form of wages paid to Australian consultants and contractors (see Banham, 2006; Hawksley, 2009). Legitimate questions are being asked about whether Australia, as the most influential “middle-power” in the Oceania region, is as interested in meeting development goals as claimed or whether, on the contrary, Australia’s policies are more about containment of various threats, ranging from the security risks posed by
a “failed state” to the risks posed by spiralling HIV infection rates and other health challenges. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Australian politicians and diplomats often referred to the neighbouring countries of Oceania as a potential “arc of instability” (Dobell, 2006; Hawskley, 2009, p. 120). More recently, under the guise of foreign aid and development, Australia has funded the establishment, and continuing running costs, of off-shore immigration detention centres in Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. The use of these Pacific Island nations as dumping grounds for asylum-seekers who have attempted to reach Australia by boat is certainly one of the reasons why Australia is sometimes accused of treating its Pacific neighbours as client states. The provision of foreign aid has also been explicitly linked to expectations about how neighbouring countries should do business with Australia. In the case of Timor-Leste, for instance, this has involved an extremely hard-line negotiating position with respect to sharing the petroleum resources of the Timor Sea; in the case of Vanuatu, it involves pressure from Australia on local politicians to liberalise land laws in order to further privatise communal land and increase direct foreign investment (see the following chapter for more detail on this issue which was highly pertinent to the audience reception of WSB’s Zero Balans).

**TfD, Education & Counter-Culture Politics**

Not surprisingly, given the contradictory way in which development has been framed as an economic challenge, TfD practitioners have often been at pains to align themselves with more radical interpretations of human rights discourse and the politics of decolonisation. In addition to these influences, early TfD practice (and applied theatre more generally) received a great impetus from the contestation/protests of radical groups against conservative Western governments
in the 1960s. During this period, the United States saw the emergence of countercultural movements and grassroots activism, including protests against the Vietnam War and nuclear-warfare, the second wave of feminism, the beginning of gay rights demonstrations and the civil rights movement. In Europe, similar new left movements began, epitomised by the May 1968 Paris protests where students and workers united in almost toppling the French capitalist economy and government.

Theatre makers followed suit by redefining relationships between the stage and auditorium, blurring the boundaries between theatre and everyday life, and moving theatre out into the streets and non-theatrical places. These artistic responses to the politics of the 1960s involved reaching back into the traditions of agit-prop (theatre for “agitation and propaganda”) that characterised the early years of the Russian Revolution (before the Stalinist crackdown of the late 1920s and early 1930s) or else followed the example of the Federal Theatre Project (established under the 1930s “New Deal” policies of Roosevelt) or drew inspiration from Brecht, from the Communist “New Theatre” movement and so on. The notion of “art as a weapon” was alive and well in many of the emerging forms of popular/activist theatre that challenged political and social repression in the 1960s.

This includes forms of popular theatre teachers of drama and professional theatre-makers integrated into child and youth education as a way to advance social equality and challenge traditional, authoritarian pedagogies. The integration was part of a newly formed post-war pedagogy called progressive education, which was particularly popular in the United States and state-funded schools in the United Kingdom. Helen Nicholson informs, “progressive education stressed the centrality of the child in the learning process and advocated classroom environments in which
children were encouraged to express themselves spontaneously and freely, without fear of social constraints” (Nicholson, 2009, p.17). The pedagogy further centred on the theory that “children learnt best by doing” (Ibid., p.19). As a result, two parallel theatrical forms—drama-in-education (teachers) and Theatre-in-Education (theatre practitioners taking theatre into educational settings)—developed, and both have become long-standing mediums for learning and social change within the field of education. Indeed, the founders of WSB, Peter Walker and Joanne Dorras, introduced these mediums into their classrooms in Zimbabwe and later hoped to use them when they relocated to Vanuatu in the late 1980s (more to be revealed in subsequent chapters).

It was also from the above context that adult education specialists from Europe and North America brought popular theatre techniques to decolonising Africa, which was beginning to build a discourse of self-reliance and look for new ways to artistically express its worldview that were different from its former colonisers. The educators worked at a grassroots level with university students and local artists and performers, producing a remarkable range of experimental theatre. The first phase of such experimentation began in Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi and Zambia with university-based artists taking “well-made” travelling plays to rural communities. Ross Kidd notes that these tours “attempt[ed] to break away from the urban-based elitist theatre inherited from the colonial system” (1985, p. 179). In 1974, the second phase of experimentation began with the Laedza Batanani (“Community Awakening”) movement in Botswana. This annual campaign involved Kidd, Martin Byram, local officials and communities, and used story-telling, puppetry, song, dance, drum-beat poetry and post-performance discussions as catalysts for community
education and action. It became a model and inspiration for similar work in Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania and Zambia, and contemporary scholar-practitioners often refer to this as the start of TfD (Epskamp, 2006; Kidd, 1985; Johansson, 2011).

Similar developments were also occurring in parts of South and South-East Asia (for instance, in the work of the Philippines Educational Theatre Association [PETA]), while, in Latin America, political theatre activists such as Alan Bolt (initially aligned with the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua) and Augusto Boal (before he was forced into exile in Europe) were creating forms of participatory theatre which, in the words of Boal, aimed to be the “rehearsal for the revolution” (1979, p. 122).

The work of Boal, in particular, has become a staple of much TfD/applied theatre practice. In part, this was because an earlier uptake of the adult education methods of Boal’s Brazilian compatriot, Paulo Freire, had prepared the ground for an enthusiastic response by TfD practitioners to the work of Boal when he started to more widely disseminate his practice from the mid-1980s onwards. Indeed, the pedagogy of Freire provided a framework for Laedza Batanani and other participatory theatre movements in the 1970s, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Asia and Latin America.

Meanwhile, Government organisations and multi-national agencies began to incorporate local cultural forms into their community-development strategies, as tools for development support communication and information campaigns. Kees Epskamp writes that the use of “local culture enabled development workers to illustrate techniques in a way that made them clear and accessible” (2006, p. 2).
While this may be true, the plays also garnered plenty of criticism from adult educators and popular theatre practitioners for their overly simplistic, top-down, message delivery styles, which were often inherited from “the old Mr. Wise and Mr. Foolish formula [of] colonial didactic theatre” (Kerr 1995, p. 160; as cited in Johansson 2011, p. 46; see also Kerr 2009).

**Applied Theatre and the Problem of Efficacy**

From where we stand now, in the second decade of the 21st century, it could be argued that much of the drive that fuelled the development of TfD, and other kinds of popular/political theatre, has greatly diminished. However, this runs the risk of overlooking sometimes very specific and local instances of extraordinarily courageous activist theatre that continues to occur in developing countries (for instance, the work of Indian street theatre activist Safdar Hashmi or of the Zimbabwean popular theatre companies Rooftop, Amakhosi, Savannah Arts & Vhitori Entertainment [Zenenga, 2011, p. 226]). Also, it ignores the ingenuity with which Western theatre practitioners who emerged from the counter-culture movements of the 1960s were able to reinvent themselves and keep going in the harsher climate of 1980s, particularly in the United Kingdom. Michael Balfour (2007)—only slightly tongue in cheek—has stated that the birth of the term “applied theatre” can be explained in one word: “Thatcherism”. At a time when the Thatcher government was crushing the trade unions and downgrading its support for state-funded welfare, public health, education and the arts, the rubric of applied theatre was a reasonably successful rhetorical manoeuvre to find ways of continuing to work on grassroots campaigns for social change among disenfranchised communities, such as those to be found in many prisons and hospitals. However, it
can also be argued that there was a cost to this tactic: theatre practitioners who, in an earlier era, did not feel the need to ask anyone for permission to rehearse the revolution now had to explicitly promote their work on the basis of more-or-less measurable goals that would match up with key bureaucratic performance indicators. The promise of efficacy (which had always been implied, if not explicit in popular/political theatre) was, in effect, becoming commoditised.

While evaluations of applied theatre/TfD projects and programmes now often report on a small number of proxy indicators of attitudinal and behavioural change, there have been some more ambitious attempts to argue for the inherently efficacious nature of these practices. Most of these arguments, directly or indirectly, follow the example of performance theorist and practitioner Richard Schechner in drawing a connection between applied theatre (or “social theatre” as Schechner calls it) and the ritual theory of the anthropologist, Victor Turner. Turner’s foundational work on the social efficacy of ritual performances stemmed from his period of ethnographic fieldwork among the Ndembu people of modern-day Zambia. In the context of this small-scale agrarian society, Turner sees ritual as a prescribed set of behaviours separate from everyday life, where a collective (often aided by a supernatural being or beings) embraces submission and the breaking down of individual selves in order to re-form and regenerate. Inspired by the earlier work of Arnold Van Gennep on “rites of passage”, Turner argued for a three-phase model of ritual performance: rites of separation; rites of limen (the crossing of a threshold of some sort) and rites of reincorporation. It is the central liminal phase which is most richly elaborated in Turner’s ethnographic case studies. In a liminal state, Turner argues, ritual participants are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law,
custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969, p. 95). Turner writes evocatively of the phenomenology of such liminal experiences. They constitute an “instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance” (1982, p. 44), when the normative constraints of everyday social life are briefly loosened.

While fully-blown liminal rituals, in Turner’s view, ultimately tend towards a socially conservative function, the experience of communitas and flow does provide a glimpse of social alternatives. Turner explains:

Ritual, in its full performative flow, is not only many-leveled, “laminated,” but also capable, under conditions of societal change, of creative modification on all or any of its levels. Since it is tacitly held to communicate the deepest values of the group regularly performing it, it has a “paradigmatic” function, in both of the senses argued for by Clifford Geertz. As a “model for” ritual can anticipate, even generate change; as a “model of” it may inscribe order in the minds, hearts and wills of participants. (1982, p. 82, italics in the original)

Later in his career, Turner reformulated somewhat his ideas about ritual performance. He came to see the three-phase ritual process described above as embedded within a more encompassing “social drama”. In other words, ritual, along with political or legal-judicial modes of redressive action, is one way of trying to heal a rift in social order. Turner theorised a four-phase social drama model: (i) an initial breach in social order developing into (ii) a fully-blown social crisis which requires (iii) redressive action, resulting in (iv) either schism or continuity. Moving beyond the specificity of his Ndembu ethnography, Turner started to consider the applicability of this social drama model to an incredibly diverse range of pre-modern and contemporary societies (his case studies included: the confrontation between
Henry II of England and Archbishop Thomas Becket, and the failed Hidalgo Insurrection within Mexico in the early 19th century [Turner, 1974]). When dealing with larger-scale, more technologically-complex modern societies, Turner acknowledged that fully liminal ritual resources were often not as prominent as those he had originally observed among the Ndembu people. Hence, he began to pay much closer attention to the kinds of liminoid (or “ritual-like”) processes that one does find in contemporary Western societies. Parades, carnivals, protest marches, music festivals, along with community-based performance works and/or the politically-engaged avant-garde theatre practices of his colleague, Richard Schechner, took on an increasingly important place in Turner’s theorising. While noting the more diffuse modes of participation that these genres allow, when compared to fully-blown ritual practices in small-scale agrarian societies, Turner nevertheless argued that all performing arts derive from the liminal heart of antecedent ritual practices and that they therefore continue to have a potential for social efficacy. Indeed, liminoid practices may offer even greater potential for social change since “the seeds of cultural transformation, discontent with the way things are culturally, and social criticism, always implicit in the pre-industrially liminal, have become situationally central” (1982, p. 45).

It is this line of thinking in Turner’s work that Richard Schechner has popularised as a theoretical cornerstone in the discipline of performance studies. Schechner argues forcefully that applied (or “social”) theatre can have a ritual-like kind of efficacy. When done well, it contains the seeds of not only personal, psychological transportation for its participants but also more enduring social transformations. However, Schechner’s arguments are not without problems. For instance, there are
certainly grounds to critique the way he sets up a binary between performances that aim for ritual-like "efficacy" versus those that are focused more on theatre-like "entertainment" (1974, pp. 467-468). Schechner tries to argue that these terms are "poles of a continuum" (1988, p. 120) and not a binary opposition, however he fails to discuss in detail any middle-ground in terms of which the opposition might be mediated. As a result, to all intents and purposes, it does function as a binary in his thinking. Notwithstanding this theoretical problem, an interest in efficacy has remained a key concern of performance studies scholars (indeed Jon McKenzie calls this constant focus on efficacy the "liminal norm" in Performance Studies—see Ian Maxwell’s essay in St John, 2008).

It is not hard to see why analogies between the efficacy of ritual performance and the potential social impact of applied theatre/TfD practice should have broad appeal not only to scholars but also to practitioners. Certainly, some kind of ritual-like efficacy looks like what these practitioners are often aspiring towards (see, most notably, Kershaw, 1992). However, inevitably, problems arise when arguments about efficacy move from the domain of theoretical discourse in a discipline like performance studies to the “coal face” of funding and evaluation discourses in the field of development. Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki draw attention to

the size of the gap between project evaluation—proving what was claimed to be and was actually done—and real impact in terms of change of attitudes and transformed lives. But severally and collectively it is still not proven that applied theatre can today work towards those more substantial changes that many of its practitioners seek to make." (2006, p. 154)
Several factors contribute towards this gap. For the most part, these transformations are rarely instant or perceptible and sometimes do not move in the different direction initially planned for. Although most international development agencies employ two types of measuring—Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) for ongoing assessment and Impact Assessment for the long-term—their frameworks for TfD projects are not typically tailored towards the ambiguities of liminal/liminoid performance practices as theorised by Turner and Schechner or simply the one-off, unique nature of a theatrical event. The economically-driven nature of many development programmes means that TfD projects must exhibit tangible proof of success, or of a project at least being somewhere on the road to success, before further funding will be granted. Proof is then collected mostly from quantitative studies and pre- and post-testing of participants, and measured against targets and benchmarks prepared at the design phase of the project. In addition, the social science-driven formats usually employed for these studies and tests predict and assess behavioural change with the presupposition that participants will change their attitude or behaviour after learning new knowledge (similar to the postulations driving the original information campaigns). Instead of such frameworks, various scholar-practitioners have advocated for more process-driven, qualitative assessments to take place (Kennedy C. Chinyowa [2011] calls for “Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation [PM&E]”), and for donors and recipients to form an open partnership and work together from the inception of a project. Peter O’Connor (2009) and James Thompson (2000) identify that such changes will not only aid the applied theatre/TfD practitioner, but also the funders, who for the most part often have no idea what applied theatre is, especially when stepping into this sort of
venture for the first time, and are measuring TfD projects the same way they would for other development projects.

It can be argued, however, that the dominant models of social science-driven M&E and Impact Assessments are not the only factors contributing towards “the size of the gap” that Etherton and Prentki refer to. Contemporary applied theatre/TfD practitioners are beginning to back away from the trap of “over-promising and under-delivering”; acknowledging the need to scale down the pretentions of what a performance experience can offer and to resist an overly instrumentalised application of theatre processes. Helen Nicholson, for instance, feels uneasy in “making...grand claims for the effects and effectiveness of [her] own work” (2005, p. 12) and prefers Schechner’s use of the term “transportation”—rather than transformation—as a better description of the applied theatre process. While transformation is a key part of the social efficacy of ritual, both Turner and Schechner held that such radical changes of social status tend to occur as a singular, permanent process only once or twice in a person’s life. By contrast, transportation denotes more of a temporary shift in which participants change and then return more-or-less back to normal. Schechner posits, however, that transformation could arise as the longer-term outcome following a continual series of more subtle transportations. In this respect, Schechner echoes the more recent call of practitioner-scholar, Michael Balfour, who suggests that we should view applied theatre as a “theatre of 'little changes’” (2009, p. 356).

**The Call to Participate**

Baz Kershaw is another practitioner-scholar of applied theatre whose work bears the imprint of Schechner and Turner’s theorising of efficacy. What Kershaw offers in
addition is a methodological alternative to the usual ways in which theatre companies try to establish proof of the efficacy of their work. For Kershaw, the key issue is not to try and measure actual efficacy (by means of conventional post-performance surveys and so on); rather, he argues that we should set out from the assumption that all performances have at least some potential for socio-political efficacy (even if only modest in scale) and that we should therefore ask: under what general conditions is this potential for efficacy most likely to be enhanced (Kershaw, 1992)?

One of the conditions underpinning efficacy, in the majority view of applied theatre/TfD practitioners, is the mobilisation of community members through participation in the process of making a community-based arts project and, by extension, the activation of audiences through more or less direct participation in any resulting performances. While the scope of what practitioners understand by participatory theatre is wider now than it once was (see for instance Shaughnessy, 2012, 2013; White, 2015), the work of Paulo Freire, referred to above, still provides a key theoretical foundation for ways of thinking about participation in applied theatre/TfD practices. Freire’s concern was to challenge forms of social oppression that manifest as the silencing of the disenfranchised, in situations where a relationship that ought to be open to dialogue (for example, across lines of race, class or gender) has degenerated into a top-down, monological relationship. With the aim to break this silence, Freire developed a pedagogy which would not only educate the disenfranchised in terms of literacy and knowledge, but also encourage critical awareness of the social and political structures in play around them, enabling them to be their own agents in the field of struggle (this process is often referred to as
“conscientisation”). In practice, this involves rejecting the “banking-method” of teaching, where the teacher passes down information to the students for them to store it, in favour of a model of education as problem-posing, where the teacher poses a problem or presents relevant information to the students in order to instigate dialogue between them.

Freire’s ideas were important to the initial development of TfD practices within Africa, particularly in countries such as Botswana where Byram and Kidd note that popular theatre practitioners were battling an engrained sense of “resignation or fatalism” within the attitudes of the people because of the “harsh environmental conditions and social relationships” (1978, p. 19) which existed. Here, literacy programmes and popular theatre initiatives like Laedza Batanani adapted the Freirean idea of using a simple “code” as a condensed graphic representation of some important local theme or broader social contradiction. Where much of Freire’s own early practice in Brazil and Chile had used cartoons, photographs or other simple visual texts as the codes to stimulate problem-posing dialogues among workshop participants, early TfD practitioners turned to theatrical story-telling modes. In Nigeria, university artists from the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaire kept company with villagers and urban squatters, listening to their stories and life experiences and then writing open-ended skits to perform back to them as a means of generating a post-performance, problem-posing dialogue. The participatory practices in these early TfD projects were not, however, above criticism. Indeed, Byram and Kidd themselves argued that their process in Laedza Batanani was really only “pseudo-participatory”: even though villagers participated as actors, as audience members and in post-performance dialogues, they were not enough in
control of the whole process (Byram & Kidd, 1982). Similarly, for the work in Nigeria, it was the university artists who oversaw the whole writing process of the skits and role-plays, rather than the people themselves (see Johansson, 2011). Despite the shortcomings of these early experiments with Freirean-inspired practice, the ground was being prepared for the reception of what is arguably still today the most widely influential body of work in TfD practice, namely the participatory theatre methods associated with Freire’s Brazilian contemporary, Augusto Boal.

In his “theatre of the oppressed” (TO), Boal translates key principles of Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed. First, he blurs the line between stage and auditorium by creating processual forms of workshop-based theatre activity in which all participants can be conceived as hybrid “spect-actors”. Thus, in the Boalian techniques of “simultaneous dramaturgy” and “forum theatre”, instead of a protagonist leading a sit-down audience through a narrative with a clearly resolved ending, the actors-on-stage leave the narrative unfinished and put themselves at the disposal of the actors-in-waiting. With the aid of a facilitator or “joker”, spect-actors bring forth from the auditorium various proposals and counter-proposals for actions that the protagonist of the drama could take in order to challenge the oppression to which they are being subjected. These proposals are sometimes improvised by the performers who originally played roles in the stimulus scenario but, more often than not, the spect-actor who brings forth a proposal will replace the original performer and explore for themselves through an improvised role-play how their proposed solution might play out in practice. In this way, all participants are actively engaged in working out tactics with which one might address, in the real world, the challenging situations that have been dramatically modelled on stage.
Boal writes that “[t]he theatre of the oppressed, in all its various modalities, is a constant search for dialogical forms, forms of theatre through which it is possible to converse” (1998, p. 4), and he built a large repertoire of forms including forum theatre (as above), image theatre, invisible theatre and legislative theatre. He also argued, polemically, that more conventional, linear narratives—what he identified (following Brecht) as an Aristotelian dramaturgy—could not promote the kind of participatory dialogue that both he and Freire saw as key to the process of critical consciousness-raising. In Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) Boal critiques this “Aristotelian” poetics as inherently conservative. The spectator, in Boal’s gloss of Aristotle, is bound to the tragic protagonist by the experience of empathy. Just as the spectator witnesses the protagonist’s catastrophic failure to challenge a destiny that is written in advance by unalterable fate, so too is the spectator herself intimidated from contesting unjust laws and practices that uphold the status quo.

Though widely echoed in the scholarship on applied theatre, there are several problems with the way Boal tries to legitimate his own practice through a polemic against the legacy of Aristotle’s Poetics. As Paul Dwyer explains, “Boal…constructs – and then demolishes – the ‘Aristotle’ he needs in order to suit his rhetorical purposes” (2005, p. 635). Boal’s reading of the Poetics suffers, firstly, from a failure to distinguish between Aristotle’s interests as a philosopher/literary critic and what we know to have been the actual practice of Athenian tragedy in the fifth-century BCE (well before Aristotle was writing), let alone the actual practice of the Athenian legal system (in which the lower classes definitely did have a constitutive role to play as paid jurists). Secondly, Boal is on shaky ground when he argues that the model of "Aristotelian Drama” has survived to this day more or less intact and
remains the dominant dramaturgy for “conventional theatre ... TV Soap operas ...
and Western films” (Boal, 1979, p. xiv). He may well be right that these popular
forms were utilised in ideologically-suspect, reactionary ways during the period of
right-wing dictatorships in Latin America when Boal’s ideas about oppositional
political theatre began to coalesce; however, it is clearly overstating the case to
suggest that these forms are always and unerringly used to hoodwink popular
audiences and distract them from pursuing a progressive social agenda. Yet, the
rhetorical structure of Boal’s anti-Aristotelian arguments also appears in the
writings of other advocates of participatory applied theatre. Annie Sloman (2012),
for example, collapses distinctions between many different types of theatre
experience (some of which are designed to play in front of a “regular” sit-down
audience) when she aligns what she calls “conventional theatre” with the narrow
communicative framework of “information campaigns” and other “message-delivery
systems”. Like Boal, she uses this broad-brushstroke representation of conventional
theatre to bolster her case for more obviously participatory modes of practice in
international community development.

Another problematic issue that arises in relation to the Boal influence on applied
theatre/TfD practice is to do with the lack of detailed consideration he gives to the
pedagogical authority which is exercised by the facilitator or “joker” of a theatre of
the oppressed (TO) workshop. It is surprising, given he is so attuned to the possibly
manipulative characteristics of so-called Aristotelian poetics, that Boal has little to
say about the potential for TO itself to be manipulated. In part, this problem can be
traced back to a similar weakness in Freire’s work. Kathleen Weiler, for instance,
offers a feminist critique of Freire that rings just as true for Boal’s theatrical appropriation of Freirean principles:

[T]he Freirean image of the teacher...is a joint learner with students and [an] authority by virtue of a greater knowledge and experience. But..., Freire fails to address the various forms of power held by teachers depending on their race, gender, and the historical and institutional settings in which they work. In the Freirean account, they are in this sense “transparent”. (1991, p. 460)

Applied theatre/TfD scholar-practitioners have likewise identified that the joker in TO practice needs to recognise his or her own conditioning, especially of being the thinker or expert, in order to prevent inadvertently manipulating participants (Chinyowa, 2009; Fals Borda, 1988). As Dwyer observes in relation to the practice of students who were being trained to take up the role of joker/facilitator in a Canadian TO project, it is all too easy for the joker—when he or she is in dialogue with other spect-actors about a social issue—“to fall back on the clichés and common sense understandings of the dominant discourses into which they have been apprenticed” (2004, p. 205).

A more sweeping critique of the Boal influence on applied theatre/TfD practice is to challenge the whole premise on which this pedagogical model is based, namely the notion that a “regular” sit-down audience is inevitably more passive than a lively group of spect-actors. Again, Boal is quite adamant here. He refers, for instance, to the spectator in an “Aristotelian” model of performance as a person who has agreed to “delegate [their] power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him” (1979, p. 122; cited in Sloman, 2012, p. 44). Paraphrasing Brecht, Boal
is dismissive of spectators who “leave their brains with their hats upon entering the theatre” (1979, p. 104; cited in Taylor, 2003, p. 205). These are, of course, caricatured images of the complex amalgam of experiences that go into actual spectatorship of (even the most conventional) theatre. However, such pronouncements are still approvingly recycled (as in the passages from Sloman and Taylor cited above). The strongest rejection of Boal’s premise is to be found in the now-celebrated paper by Jacques Rancière that forms the title essay of “The Emancipated Spectator” (2007).

Rancière resists the premise that regular “spectatorship is a bad thing” (2007, pp. 271-272), arguing that this belief involves two mistaken assumptions. First, Rancière argues, theatre makers are too quick to assume that action is necessarily associated with knowledge; second, they also too often assume that seeing is associated with ignorance and passivity. For Rancière, what is really in play here is a structure of inequality between two different kinds of intelligence. This inequality, he says, is made apparent by the ease with which the above associations can be swapped around:

But it is easy to turn matters around by stating that those who act, those who work with their bodies, are obviously inferior to those who are able to look—that is, those who can contemplate ideas, foresee the future, or take a global view of our world. The positions can be switched, but the structure remains the same. (2007, p. 277)

Rancière asserts that in reality the same function of intelligence is at work in both roles, namely one of figuring out, translating and comparing what is present on stage with what one has already seen, known, heard and experienced. Therefore, for
Rancière, emancipation comes through “the process of verification of equal intelligence” (2007, p. 275) rather than through an attempt to smash the fourth wall and abolish the conventional practice of spectatorship. In Chapter Four of this thesis, looking at modes of spectator participation in the work of WSB, we will see how much value the company places on the unabashed opinions of their audiences, even though—or indeed, precisely because—they are “not a theatre going audience” (J. Dorras, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Nevertheless, there is no simple alternative formula for the development of emancipatory theatre practices to be derived from Rancière’s essay. As Gareth White explains, while Rancière is well-justified in celebrating the intelligence of an audience of (only superficially passive) onlookers, he uses a very limited model of theatrical practice as the sole reference point for his argument and, even in this case, he pays no attention to the “feedback loop” through which spectators and actors influence each other in very immediate and observable ways (White, 2013, p. 23).

Having noted various critiques of Boal’s position, it is nevertheless important to recognise that TO techniques continue to inspire applied theatre/TfD projects that, in the hands of skilled and ethically-minded practitioners, can still generate important opportunities for critical consciousness-raising. Where the Boal influence has perhaps been overbearing is in the way it sometimes leads practitioners away from considering the possibility of engaging more intimately with local cultural forms of participation that may be occurring around the edges of a participatory theatre workshop. Thus, James Thompson, writing of his experiences as an applied theatre practitioner in Sri Lanka, notes the disjunction between his daytime participatory workshops and the singing and dancing which was organised by the
participants themselves in the evenings. At the time, Thompson’s research focus remained on the “serious” workshops. It was only upon later reflection that he saw himself maintaining a “mistaken hierarchy” (2009, p. 3) that is prevalent throughout the applied theatre field. Thompson argues that alternative participatory practices, derived from non-Freirean, non-Boalian sources, are too often neglected in discourses about the potential for efficacious performance forms to mobilise participants and promote social change. Thompson also notes how, at the centre of the activities designed by participants outside the workshops “proper”, was a focus on participation not as serious theatre “work” but as a form of joy and celebration. This is an issue to which I will return below, in the context of a discussion about aesthetics and affect, but, for the moment, it is worth looking more closely at the issue of how TfD practices have interacted with local cultural forms.

**Cultural (Mis)Appropriation**

The idea that TfD practitioners should look to make some use of indigenous cultural forms is, by now, uncontroversial. Given that indigenous aesthetic forms are already inextricably linked to the social, economic and political structures of community life, their use in TfD creates a sense of familiarity, helping participants to identity with the practice. Moreover, as Kerr argues, TfD practitioners have much to learn from studying the complex, “multi-layered” techniques of indigenous performers (2009, p. 101). However, the promise of sophisticated engagement between “canonical” TfD practices and indigenous forms has not always been fulfilled. Many TfD practitioners are understandably wary of rushing too quickly into the development of hybridised TfD practices either because they recognise that they lack detailed, specific
knowledge of the culture in which they are working or because they are sensitive to the potential for cultural misappropriation.

This wariness can be traced back to a major debate that took place in the field of TfD during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The proceedings of the international seminar on *The Use of Indigenous Social Structures and Traditional Media in Non-Formal Education and Development* (Colletta and Kidd, 1980) offer a particularly sharp perspective on the key issues. On the one hand, among many of the popular theatre practitioners who were delegates at this seminar, there was deep concern about the overall effect of taking specific, ritualised indigenous performance practices out of their original context in order to “re-purpose” them as tools for community development. Such borrowings were seen as particularly suspect when driven not by grassroots NGOs but by local government or larger foreign development agencies or commercial interests. On the other hand, among many of the aid and development workers at the conference, there was a strong feeling that, if they were to work effectively with grassroots communities, then they should be operating within and communicating through local cultural forms.

While it is easy to sympathise with the views expressed by these aid and development workers, it must be remembered that the concerns of the popular theatre practitioners were influenced by important geo-political realities of the time, namely the emergence of neo-colonial forms of control in many newly created independent nations, together with a more general mistrust of “one-way”, “top-down” approaches to development and economic modernisation and sometimes well-founded fears that local, traditional forms of culture could easily be undermined. Already, by this time, popular theatre practitioners from Latin America
were witnessing governments and the ruling class appropriate the people's own culture as propaganda to use against them. Furthermore, international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) were also already treating indigenous practices within Asia and Africa as a generalised, rather than locally-specific, cultural resource by drawing up lists of "folk media" that were flexible enough to be co-opted as a delivery mechanism for development messages in any country where roughly analogous popular forms might be found.

By contrast, the view of most popular theatre practitioners was that it is more important to intervene in development politics by first helping to mobilise people in the struggle to overcome structural forms of oppression. Rather than covertly smuggling this agenda into would-be lookalike local cultural forms, these practitioners had faith in the cross-cultural relevance of Freirean/Boalian practice or forms borrowed from Western popular theatre movements. Subsequently, the people themselves could decide if they wanted to adapt parts of their own culture for developmental purposes and make new forms or not (see Colletta & Kidd, 1980, for fuller coverage of this debate).

Today, this wariness with regard to seeing local, indigenous cultural practices too readily pressed into service as tools for development purposes remains. Scholar-practitioners like Chinyowa (2009) continue to report on seemingly well-intentioned development projects that nevertheless misappropriate indigenous cultural forms or create “folk media shells” into which any number of development messages might be inserted. In a similar manner, as mentioned above, David Kerr argues:
The recruitment of local theatre practitioners allows professional communicators to create appropriate stories using...proverbs, songs and dances to ensure local acceptance. But such attempts to pack new messages into old cultural forms may sometimes be closer to appropriation than respect for “traditions”. The difference between the lessons of Theatre for Development and those of indigenous performance is that the latter used multi-layered performance techniques and motifs rather than blatant didacticism. (2009, pp. 100-101)

A more promising, cautious approach can be seen in TfD projects where practitioners who have come from outside the local culture (and, for better or worse, it is often the case that the facilitators of TfD projects are outside consultants)6 present their own ways of working first and then, quite consciously, develop a dialogue with local artists about the possibility of melding local, cultural forms with these imported practices. For instance, Brad Haseman and his team at the Queensland University of Technology have been keenly aware of the need for such cross-cultural dialogue in the work that they have been developing in relation to HIV/AIDS and other development issues in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Haseman, Baldwin and Linthwaite report that the group “perceived [the] disconnect between the rich performativity of the country in which the programme was being implemented and the drama-in-education and theatre-for-development techniques which had so far been developed as components of the programme” (2014, p. 100).

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6 Syed Jamil Ahmed (2002) and Mojisola Adebayo (2015) both make the complaint that applied theatre and TfD are all too often something that is “done to” people in developing countries by outside Western experts (see also White, 2015).
Consequently, they worked intensively with the artistic instigators of PNG Folk Opera and members of the villages the play would tour to. The important point to note here is that such cross-cultural dialogues take a significant amount of time to develop if they are to move beyond a tokenistic appropriation of local cultural forms. The challenge, as Thompson suggests with reference to the singing and dancing he observed in Sri Lanka, is to understand not only the outward aesthetic form of local practices but also the context in which they have developed.

The Aesthetic Turn in Applied Theatre/TfD Practice

Thus far, we have considered how the difficulty of demonstrating the efficacy of applied theatre has been met—above and beyond any claims that might be supported via M&E-style evaluation and Impact Assessment reports—through (i) an appeal to, at the very least, the potential for efficacy that applied theatre might hold simply by virtue of its ritual-like qualities, (ii) arguments about the way that this potential is augmented in the highly participatory forms that applied theatre often takes, and (iii) additional arguments about how the potential efficacy of TfD practices, in particular, might be enhanced through careful borrowings from ritual and ritual-like indigenous performance practices. Alongside all of these arguments, and particularly prominent over the last decade, has been a debate about the aesthetics of applied theatre. As Bjorn Rasmussen argued in an address to mark the opening of The Centre for Applied Theatre Education and Research in Brisbane, “All forms of drama and theatre practice...rely on aesthetic engagement for their power and effectiveness, and applied theatre is no exception” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 6; see also Rasmussen, 2000). In a similar vein, Haseman and Joe Winston assert that, fundamentally, aesthetics involve a deep mode of engagement whereby the artwork
(or art process) moves the participant to “‘experience’ the situation that confronts them.” (2010, p. 467)

Notwithstanding the urgency with which practitioners have sought to reclaim “beauty” and “pleasure” as key elements of the work that they make, the attempt to delineate an aesthetics of applied theatre/TfD is necessarily fraught. As Gareth White points out, it is hard to see how a “singular aesthetic of applied theatre in general” could be distilled since applied theatre is “a discourse around theatre and performance, that enables us to see things in common between practices and the contexts in which they happen, rather than a coherent set of practices in itself” (White, 2015, p. 13). Furthermore, as White goes on to argue, the renewed focus on aesthetics in applied theatre has, for the most part, proceeded in the absence of any rigorous engagement with the scholarly, philosophical literature on aesthetic theory, with the result that terms are often used in imprecise ways.

This is not so surprising given the difficulty of conceptualising applied theatre practices within the framework of Kant’s Critique of Judgment which continues to exert a formidable influence on aesthetic theory. While it is well beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in depth with this Kantian tradition, it is worth recalling several key points. Briefly, Kant shifted the understanding of aesthetics in the 18th century from a focus on the object (as was the case in the aesthetic theory of Baumgarten, one of Kant’s mentors) to the judgment of the object by the viewer. This judgment involves a sensorial and contemplative connection in which a person’s imagination freely plays with art or nature and feels pleasure or displeasure in it. Nevertheless, for Kant, there is no inherent purpose, ulterior motive or obvious application which this act of contemplation must support. Enjoyment of the artwork,
the act of contemplation itself, is the point. Kant describes four components to the judgement of taste: disinterestedness, purposiveness, universality and necessity. To begin with, he argues against a priori criteria in the formation of an aesthetic judgement since to approach the artwork with a specific set of interests already in mind would be to foreclose on the possibility for surprise and pleasure in the contemplation of the object. In a similar vein, while he rejects the notion that an artwork should have any purpose beyond arousing the pleasure afforded by disinterested contemplation, Kant acknowledges that this in itself constitutes a special kind of purposiveness without purpose. In other words, a person can only be satisfied (or dissatisfied) in the object itself, allowing the object to bring them pleasure (or displeasure). Importantly, Kant makes a distinction between the emotional response one has to art and the emotions one experiences in everyday life which depend on a multitude of external stimuli. As far as universality and necessity are concerned, Kant proposes that, while there must be a free play of imagination and emotional response for every individual who contemplates an artwork with disinterest, there is also a compulsion, as soon as one has experienced pleasure or displeasure in the work, to want to share this judgment of taste with others, to verify that it is not, after all, arbitrary, and that others feel the same way.

Clearly, even this brief synopsis suggests the difficulties of accounting for applied theatre practices within a Kantian framework. For one thing, there is nothing in Kant's aesthetic theory that acknowledges the relevance of community networks, social status or cultural belonging to the ways in which one might approach an artwork. As Christian Helmut Wenzel explains, Kantian aesthetic theory dwells not
on the empirical details of how artworks are produced and received but belongs to the realm of the transcendental:

Within the framework of transcendental philosophy, there is nothing in between: you cannot think of yourself as a member of particular group, because the characteristics of such a group would be empirical and never a priori. (They would be a legitimate topic for his anthropology instead.) We may find this unsatisfying, but Kant’s aesthetics, as far as it is part of his transcendental system, simply cannot deal with such phenomena as cultures and communities.

(2005, p. 29; emphasis in the original)

Be that as it may, Kant’s aesthetic philosophy (whether he intended it or not) has been taken up, since the 18th century, in ways that have legitimated quite particular (and exclusionary) forms of cultural practice in the Western “art world”. Kant’s aesthetics have often provided the rhetorical justification for those who would argue that art is an autonomous activity, a special realm where beauty and pleasure can be experienced, supposedly, by anyone who is sufficiently sensitive. This is a view that wilfully misrecognises just how much economic capital, how many class-based associations and how many years of apprenticeship normally goes into producing the “right” kind of sensitivity. Above all, it is this perversion of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness that irks scholars of applied theatre for whom art is also, in some sense, a heteronomous activity, connecting in all sorts of ways to other fields of social practice (see White, 2015). Thus, Helen Nicholson, among others who have sought to problematise the supposed binary of “pure” and “applied” theatre, references the seminal critique of Kantian aesthetics that Pierre Bourdieu puts
forward in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Following a Bourdieuean perspective, we need to see the relatively underdeveloped discourse on aesthetics in applied theatre as symptomatic of the ways in which these practices often struggle to achieve recognition as legitimate artforms, precisely because they challenge the view that art is an autonomous activity, rather than a field where “standards of taste became divided along class lines, and the aesthetic sense became increasingly harnessed to—and believed to legitimate—dominant class and hegemonic values” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 7). As Haseman and Winston acknowledge, no matter how convinced applied theatre practitioners may be of the centrality of aesthetics to their work, “[i]t is hardly likely that [non-arts funding] organisations will keep writing cheques based on the quality of the sensuous experience and other aesthetic indicators rather than what the pre-tests and post-test tell them about attitude change” (2010, p. 465).

Nevertheless, Haseman and Winston, along with White, make a strong case for keeping some elements of Kant’s framework in play whilst rejecting elitist assumptions about art as a special cultural realm. In particular, these scholar-practitioners argue that there is merit in the Kantian notion of aesthetics as a mode of knowledge and experience that mediates between logical reasoning and ethical judgements. Moreover, there is something to be said for Kant’s views about the autonomy of aesthetic judgements at least insofar as he emphasises “their capacity to occur to us without our willing them or reasoning them out” (White, 2015, p. 35). Surely, applied theatre practitioners as much as any other artist, would be keen to assert the capacity of their work to surprise an audience into thinking and feeling in new ways. Thus, White concludes:
[W]ith a little moderation of the language – or an allowance that more than one concept of beauty and the aesthetic might be at work in the same situation – we might also find that the pure, rare and illuminating experience of beauty is something that occurs to us in addition, and in supplement, to the social character of art and all its undeniable complex connectedness. (2015, p. 35)

The attempt to salvage what still seems valuable in Kantian philosophy has been matched by various efforts to identify complementary theoretical perspectives from which the aesthetics of applied theatre can be understood. White, for instance, sets Kant’s transcendental philosophy against the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey for whom art is a special experience that nevertheless remains bound to the experiences of daily life. Other applied theatre scholars and practitioners have looked for alternative aesthetic frameworks in non-Western discourses (such as Sanskrit with its different offerings of beauty, see Ahmed, 2006, with an introduction from Winston, 2006b). However, probably the most widely cited argument in contemporary debates over the aesthetics of applied theatre is the notion, popularised by James Thompson, that “the affective dimensions of performance, especially those of joy and the perception of beauty, have to be given a place alongside – or even in precedence to – the effective dimensions that are much easier to analyse or quantify.” (White, 2015, pp. 10-11; see Thompson, 2009; italics added)

Thompson calls for the “end of effect” as the theoretical lynchpin of applied theatre, arguing for greater valorisation of the compelling qualities of affect. This argument has been taken up most notably by Nicola Shaughnessy (2012, 2013) who, like other performance scholars (particularly in the area of dance and movement studies),
seeks to tether her discussion of affect to the emerging research on embodied cognition that is coming out of neurobiology. While sympathetic to this approach, for my purposes in this thesis, a more immediate connection between aesthetic theory and understandings of affect may be found in the work of anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (whom Haseman and Winston also cite in their critique of Kant’s notion of autonomous aesthetics).

In response to what Geertz sees as the excessively formalist approach taken in most Western art criticism, he emphasises that “to study an art form is to explore a sensibility” and that this sensibility “is essentially a collective formation” (1979, p. 1478). As he elaborates:

The capacity...to perceive meaning in pictures (or poems, melodies, buildings, pots, dramas, statues) is, like all other fully human capacities, a product of collective experience which far transcends it....It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art...is possible. (1979, p. 1488)

For Geertz, there is a “matrix of sensibility” that grows out of participation in all of the genres of social activity that make up a culture and it is a shared knowledge of this sensibility that, ultimately, provides the most important medium for an artist’s work. Art expresses a feeling for life that is brought into actual existence by living in the midst of certain things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with and react to; particular
varieties of cabbages, particular sorts of kings. Art and the equipment
to grasp it are made in the same shop. (1979, p. 1497)

Hence, not surprisingly, Geertz argues strongly against the notion that we can find
any “commonality among all the arts in all the places that one finds them” that would
justify “including them under a single western-made rubric” based on a universal
notion of beauty (1979, p. 1499). Rather, as he puts it:

If there is a commonality it lies in the fact that certain activities
everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are
visible, audible and—one needs to make up a word here—tactile,
that they can be cast in forms where the sense, and through the senses
the emotions, can reflectively address them. (1976, p. 1499)

It is in this respect that Geertz provides a bridge between what White would call a
heteronomous, culturally-specific, socially-engaged aesthetics and the kind of
autonomous aesthetic experience that not only Kant but also more recent theorists
of affect would argue for. Consider, for instance, how closely Felicity Colman’s
definition of affect matches the language of Geertz above: “affect,” for Colman, “is
that indescribable moment before the registration of the audible, visual and tactile
transformation produced in reaction to a certain situation, event or thing” (2005, p.
11).

If, on the one hand, affect theory approaches Kantian aesthetics insofar as it refers to
an emotional experience that often catches us unawares, on the other hand, it is
important to remember that affect can also be considered—as Geertz would have
it—an emotional reaction that is never entirely spontaneous but is also, in part, a
patterned response, influenced by personal and collective histories, relationships and socio-cultural structures. Social scientist, Margaret Wetherell, offers a particularly useful synthesis of neurobiological and cultural/anthropological versions of affect theory when she reminds us that it is not only our immediate affective responses that are influenced by socio-cultural structures but also our "*descriptions of [such] experience*” which are equally “embedded in the everyday routines and sense-making procedures of social life” (2012, p. 42, italics added). As evidence, she refers to the work of anthropologists, social psychologists and social constructionists, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which was “finding in study after study huge variability and contingency in emotional lives, and in how people across the globe narrated and interpreted their physiological states” (2012, p. 17).

For Wetherell, affect is best defined as “embodied meaning-making” (2012, p. 4) and the way in which she describes this process fits well with what appeared to be happening at various times during the performances I attended of WSB’s *Zero Balans*. For instance, several moments in the play dramatized scenes of gender-based violence that evoked a strongly visceral response not only for myself personally but also, to judge from the noise around me, from many other women in the audience. Borrowing the framework presented by Wetherell (2012, pp. 29-30), we might suggest that the biological and cultural dimensions of such an affective experience come together as follows.

A female audience member hears a man on stage yelling at a woman in a loud, angry voice. This voice triggers a sense of danger in the female spectator and her body begins to react physiologically. In this process, her brain automatically sends signals through her body using the autonomic nervous system (ANS). This means that
changes occur in her heart and breathing rates, her blood flow and in her digestive system. In fact, her blood flow moves from her digestive system into her muscles in preparation for action. Her facial expressions, body movement and stance may also change. Hence, the female audience member's heart may quicken, her breathing stop for a moment, her head and eyes lower, her lips may frown, the hairs on her shoulders and arms may rise, her fists clench and her gut may begin to cramp. All of this can happen in less than a second. At the same, her endocrine system produces hormones, which also ready the body for action and heighten her emotions. In addition, the central nervous system (CNS) consciously makes neurological connections and pathways (aided by the ANS increasing the level of blood to the brain). This stimulates the brain to compare, evaluate, explain and send information. Memories and images appear may appear. For the female audience member this could easily be a personal experience where a man has performed a similar action to her. But as this is happening, her mind also has the incredible ability to step out of its body, so to speak, and analyse all the developments that are taking place within it.

It is this whole physiological aspect, working in conjunction with the emotions and thoughts (which are all situated within a culturally and socially constructed medium), which predisposes a person to act. Even after the strong initial response occurs, the diminished longer-term effect of the response can still remain in the body afterwards for up to 24 hours. If this lessened state continues within the female participant, her mind and body will be more pre-disposed to think and act in response to the stimuli within this period. Although I have chosen the example of a potentially distressing affect, it is important to note that the body and mind is inclined to act upon positive stimuli and emotions just as much as negative ones. For
Thompson, this is critical. He advocates for an applied theatre practice that can stimulate joy and laughter, compelling participants not simply to engage in thought and inquiry, but also to engage “at every level” (2009, p. 125, italics in the original). Indeed, Thompson argues that affect is the missing middle ground I referred to earlier when critiquing the binary opposition between efficacy and entertainment that has been a legacy of the Turner/Schechner influence on applied theatre theory (2009, p. 130).

**The Methodological Approach of This Thesis**

The work of Geertz is valuable not only for its contribution in terms of building a bridge between affect theory (in both its neurobiological and social constructionist varieties) and the emerging scholarship on applied theatre aesthetics. It also suggests a strong methodological point of departure—namely, ethnographic inquiry based on participant-observation fieldwork—as a strategy for pursuing the research questions I mapped out in the introduction to this thesis. Furthermore, such an approach is broadly in line with the recommendations of non-formal educators, development workers and applied theatre scholar-practitioners who have gone before me. These recommendations include calls for more ethnography and participant-observation in order to understand how to utilise local cultural forms in TfD projects (Colletta & Kidd, 1980) and for more process-oriented evaluation of TfD projects (Chinyowa, 2011; O’Connor, 2009 & Thompson, 2000).

Ethnography, as a form of social research, entails what we can think of as a humanistic, interpretive approach to studying lived experience. While rigorously empirical, it does not follow the positivist model in which data is generally collected and coded according to pre-determined, standardised categories, in line with
whatever hypothesis one is testing, and where attempts are made to control for experimental variables. Rather, ethnographers deal with unstructured data, encountered in situ, striving to record as much as possible of what is going on in the settings where fieldwork occurs and only coding, analysing and interpreting the data afterwards. Ethnography acknowledges that culture is not static or easily defined; it is always an emergent phenomenon, a complex spinning of “webs of significance”, as Geertz puts it (1973, p. 5). For this reason, the researcher tries to avoid abstracting data from the contexts in which it is most immediately meaningful for the participants among whom she is researching. Quantitative data such as surveys, census information, newspaper clippings and maps, as well as interview materials, can certainly support ethnographic inquiry but the core methodological premise is that one learns by participating in, and observing close-at-hand, human actions and interactions. As Atkinson and Hammersley argue, “we cannot study the world without being part of it” (1994, p. 249).

In the broadest terms, the task of the ethnographer is to understand how the participants among whom one is carrying out fieldwork are themselves making sense of whatever cultural practice it is that they are engaged in. For Geertz, this requires a “thick description” of the practice, in which different interpretive frameworks from which different (possibly competing) meanings are derived, become clearer. As well as addressing the question “What do these people think is going on here?” ethnography, in Geertz’ view, is also very much about trying to understand the different conceptions of selfhood that one finds in different cultural contexts, hence his advice to analyse “the symbolic forms—words, images,
institutions, behaviours—in terms of which...people actually [represent] themselves to themselves and to one another” (1983, p.58).

The methodology and techniques for participant observation vary according to each case and location, however one privileged site for the kind of inquiry Geertz has in mind is the process of theatrical rehearsal and, indeed, ethnographically-inflected “rehearsal studies” constitute a growing sub-discipline within the larger body of contemporary scholarship on theatre and performance studies (see McAuley, 2012 for an overview). The early work in rehearsal studies described by McAuley tended to focus on documenting the process of transferring a dramatic text “from page to stage” in order to understand how some of the meaning potential in the text is taken up while other possibilities are dropped, how ideas are given material form through design choices, blocking, gesture and so on. More recent work, however, has acknowledged that the rehearsal process constitutes a rich and complex set of social interactions worthy of study in their own right. Theatrical rehearsal provides a context in which people take seriously the idea that social identity is fluid and cultural norms are open to critique. As Brecht understood, as soon as actors are presented with characters and a story to represent, everything is up for grabs: How does a chief stand? How do the villagers act if they want to challenge the chief’s authority? What does love or hatred or shame or grief look like in this society? Must these things always look like this?

Although rehearsals are sometimes a “hidden world” (Letzler Cole, 1992) and access is not always easy, the opportunity to see social agents grappling with such questions does offer the participant-observer a surprisingly wide window onto
matters of great cultural significance. It also offers insights, as Rossmanith (2009) notes, into how those involved in making theatre understand what theatre itself is, what it means to be involved in this kind of kind of work, how different ways of working are legitimated, how people see the role of theatre in society. Drawing on McAuley’s work, Rossmanith provided a model for the kind of notes and sketches I would take during rehearsals, looking at features of “place-space, time, bodies/movement, dialogue, as well as macro-institutional context” (2009, para. 22).

Like Rossmanith and many other ethnographers, I also drew on some basic principles of grounded theory (see, for instance, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) when it came to fleshing out fuller fieldnotes from my early jottings, then coding these notes, comparing different instances, establishing key categories of the behaviour I’d observed and relationships between these categories.

My participant-observation fieldwork took place primarily within the rehearsals and performances of Zero Balans, at the Wan Smolbag Haos (House/Theatre) in Port Vila. As a researcher (and outsider to WSB in various ways), I recognise the immense privilege of being granted access by the NGO to enter into their rehearsal space and analyse their processes, particularly since the company has not received any scholarly interest before in regards to the big plays. With this in mind, I approached the participant-observation of the rehearsals and performances of Zero Balans with a spirit of what the Australian theatre director, Lindy Davies, has referred to as “unconditional, positive regard” (Ginters, 2006, p. 56; Ginters, 2008, p. 88). While ethnographic observations are always partial (in both senses of the word), I have strived to maintain a degree of reflexivity about my position in relation to the work.

While I had been in communication with WSB for some time by email, phone and during a previous trip to Vanuatu, news of the opportunity to observe rehearsals for Zero Balans came through with not much lead time and, owing to the vagaries of funding, I was not able to join the company until they were three weeks into their rehearsal period. Despite this, I was still able to witness a full month of rehearsals, stage preparations and dress rehearsals, followed by two weeks of performances. During this period, it was possible to develop a fairly detailed picture of how the company worked together in rehearsals and of their interactions with the wider Port Vila community. During rehearsals, I kept to the same routine as the actors, turning up with them at 8am(-ish!), or whatever time had been indicated by the director the day before, and I participated in company warm-ups. These warm-ups consisted of a series of games to warm up bodies and vocal chords, as well as to develop relationships, spatial awareness, mental agility and teamwork. My involvement with the warm-ups helped break the barrier between the observer and the observed, and I am thankful to the director for inviting me to join in. The company then rehearsed on the theatre stage and during rehearsals I sat in the audience section. Particularly during the early period of my fieldwork, I kept a low profile, recognising, as McAuley puts it, that a participant-observer in a rehearsal is “in it but not of it” and that one’s task is to maintain “a balance between empathic involvement and disciplined detachment” (1998, p.77; italics in the original). To this end, I often sat at the back or corners of the audience seating, and recorded the rehearsals only by way of pen and paper. Although audio and video recording can certainly aid the rehearsal observer,
McAuley writes that nothing can “replace the live presence of the academic observer” (1998, p. 76). I valued being relatively inconspicuous over having elaborate recording technology as no academic has sat through or studied the rehearsals of a WSB big play before. It was a new experience for the group to have an outsider sitting in rehearsals (moreover ni-Vanuatu, like other Melanesian peoples, have sometimes had cause to regret being “anthropologised”), so I did not want to make the group uncomfortable or distract their attention in any way from the work at hand. It was enough to have a young, white woman in tortoiseshell, hipster glasses watching and writing (furiously at times) in a notebook. However, as the warm-ups and rehearsals continued and we interacted more outside of the rehearsal space, my relationship with the company grew. I helped with rigging the lighting. I sat closer. I laughed loud in humorous scenes. Some actors began to look to me for approval while rehearsing a scene, their eyes questioning “did I do that well?” This would always be returned with a big smile, nod or thumbs up. Furthermore, as rehearsals progressed, I was no longer a sole observer: local community members began to watch the rehearsals too, the confidence and energy of the actors increased and by Opening Night my heart filled with pride. At the same time, it was important to remain aware of the proceedings and make sure not to overstep my mark as observer. McAuley notes how necessary it is “to acknowledge and be sensitive to the mediations that are occurring” (1998, p. 80) and describes occasions when directors or actors have asked observers to leave the rehearsal room because their presence—in a particular scene, rehearsal or meeting—will most likely produce a negative effect. In situations of conflict, the observer must be respectful and bow out when needed. One night towards the end of the rehearsal period, the scriptwriter called a
serious meeting with the actors and crew; although I could guess the subject of the meeting, I did not enquire and left the building.

Kate Rossmanith cites, as one of the strengths of ethnographic method, that it sometimes opens up “potential for the researcher to discern between a conscious discourse about a practice and a less conscious discourse within a practice” (2009, para. 12). For this to occur, however, it is important to expand one’s view beyond simply the happenings inside the rehearsal room and to consider these rehearsal behaviours in relation to the wider culture that the cast, crew and audiences inhabit.

I turned up early to performances, sat in the audience in different spots observing (and feeling) the interaction between the stage and the audience, and twice watched from backstage. In addition, I ate with the actors at the WSB nutrition centre each day, joined in a company fieldtrip, went to a fundraiser with a few of the actors at the yut senta and got to know other Wan Smolbag workers and volunteers outside of the company. In my previous trip to Vanuatu, to establish an initial contact with WSB, I had watched the filming of, and was given a small cameo role in, several scenes of their celebrated television series Love Patrol. I also participated in three teachers’ workshops, as well as singing, acting and film editing classes at the yut senta. Apart from the aforementioned activities and extending my rehearsal notes and descriptions, days away from the theatre were spent exploring in and around Port Vila and participating in ni-Vanuatu activities separate from the NGO. Like other cities in developing countries, Port Vila contains a vibrant expatriate community of businessmen and women, governmental, non-governmental, aid and development, workers and volunteers. Although I came to know a number of people in the expatriate community who were able to offer interesting perspectives on local
culture and politics, I chose to immerse myself in a ni-Vanuatu community to better understand their sensibility and progress my grasp of Bislama, the *lingua franca* for most locals. I lived with a ni-Vanuatu family of six near the centre of town in a well-built house, albeit without hot water or a washing machine (Wi-Fi was available, however, which, in itself, suggests something of the uneven nature of development in an increasingly globalised economy). The family I stayed with were highly involved and well-known in the Vanuatu music industry, the boxing community and their Pentecostal-type church just outside of Vila, in Teoma. To them, as well as to the members of WSB, I owe a considerable debt.

**Conclusion**

In tracing the development and political context of TfD, the theories of scholar/practitioners such as Schechner and Thompson, and the scholarship of Turner and Geertz, we can see the incredible capacity of theatre to be able to enter into the complexities of a community and connect with their “matrix of sensibility” in a deep, meaningful and catalytic way. Nevertheless, moving into the bureaucratic world of the development sector has presented TfD practitioners with a number of challenges. Namely in terms of arguing for the efficacy of their work, ensuring it is culturally appropriate, and theorising its aesthetics. This is because the traditional donor-driven funding models of the development sector, its programme design and its M&E are not typically tailored towards the unique nature of what theatre “is” or “does” or is capable of. In saying this, the relationship between WSB and their co-funders AusAID and NZAid does present a counterpoint to this argument and is a large reason why the NGO has the freedom to focus on the aesthetics of its projects (more to be revealed later). Nonetheless, this doesn’t solely answer the key concerns
of practitioners and of this thesis. This chapter argues that an anthropological methodology can provide a way forward. Most notably, an ethnographically-inflected study of rehearsal offers a useful way to address the key concerns of this thesis. In particular, it offers helpful perspectives on the question of how a culture prepares people to participate in aesthetic practices in certain ways and how the aesthetics of theatre resonate with cultural forms and social norms outside of the theatre. Participant-observation generally begins, however, with an attempt to find "sensitising concepts" (Emerson et al, 1995) from among the existing research on the locations where one is planning to carry out fieldwork. Hence, the following chapter will aim to help the reader "find their feet" in Vanuatu and within WSB as I myself needed to do before immersing myself in the field more deeply (Geertz, 1973).
Chapter 3: Navigating Worlds: Wan Smolbag Theatre and the Development of Vanuatu

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the emergence of the human rights discourse and some of the geo-political factors that have influenced development politics. I then contrasted them with the kinds of grassroots approaches of applied theatre/TfD practice. At the heart of some of the most challenging issues for both development workers and TfD practitioners to negotiate, as also suggested in the previous chapter, there lies the question of culture. Following Geertz’s assertion that culture “is always a local matter” (1976, p. 1475), this chapter will deal with Vanuatu, in particular the capital Port Vila and the island it sits on, Efate, and consider relevant historical, social and political features of ni-Vanuatu culture. The chapter discusses wider development concerns regarding bilateral partnerships—specifically between Australia and Vanuatu—and identifies key issues Vanuatu faces, such as political corruption, the land tenure system, gender inequality and youth unemployment, all of which WSB takes up in the play Zero Balans. These discussions provide meaning to the “world” that WSB inhabits and help to ground a multi-faceted understanding of the issues in the 2011 big play, which is the focus of this research. Therefore, the chapter first foregrounds these discussions with an account of WSB’s own history and growth as an organisation, as well as a synopsis of the play, Zero Balans, thus setting the stage for Chapters Four and Five which present the bulk of my ethnographic description and analysis.
Wan Smolbag Theatre

*To begin at the beginning, here are directions for getting to WSB combined with a fieldnote describing my first impressions:*

From the International airport, drive down the main road towards town, go straight through the Tagabe round-a-bout with the three large Digicel advertisements, pass the Tusker beer factory on the left and on the next left you will find WSB. Behind the small hedge stand three large, worn buildings, surrounded by grass and gravel, drive through the gravel driveway and park behind the hedge. The first building, the Wan Smolbag Haos, will greet you with its faded paint. Inside you will find (air-conditioned!) offices, the theatre, which doubles as a film set, and the sound studio. The small, KPH⁷ reproductive health clinic is tucked in behind, providing free care in a safe, private space for approximately 400 patients per month. Now turn around to your right. The middle building contains more air-conditioned offices, including the publications office at the rear, filled with educational workbooks, comics, training manuals, DVDs, CDs, and a world map with string and pins indicating the many countries WSB send their resources to. The next room over is a studio, with one wall-length mirror and three walls covered in bright, bold graffiti. Hip-hop and gospel tracks pump out as youth practise their moves for fun or in preparation for competitions and public performances. It also holds workshops and acting classes, and on Wednesdays, pop your head in to see the disabilities theatre group, Rainbow Theatre, having a wonderful time. The last space at the front of the building is the IT training room, which is constantly packed with youth on computers. Walk towards

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⁷ An acronym for *Kam Pusum Hed*, Bislama for “push your head round the door”, or in another words, a Drop-In centre.
the third building with black silhouettes decorated on its walls, a metal fence and an outdoor area. This is the *yut senta*. Its rooms hold sewing, literacy, acting, singing and music classes. The literacy classes are for all ages (including grandparents); the sewing classes produce items like purses and bags for the youth to sell and the music classes create bands to play at events and festivals. In one room, the mangled fan remains on the ceiling, a few drawings of Che Guevara and marijuana litter the walls, and youth plug their mobile phones into the power point to charge them. Later in the day, you can find the large *yut senta* drama club noisily practising a play outside or in one of the larger classrooms, and a reggae backbeat from the keyboard in the music room is constantly reverberating over the grounds. From the *yut senta*, follow the dirt road, past the dilapidated shed on the right and you will find the astroturf, where youth can participate and train in hockey, futsal (a variation of football/soccer), volleyball and other sports. The astroturf meets international standards and hosts sports games and competitions. These opportunities have helped Vanuatu sports teams to go overseas and take part in international sporting competitions. Continue on the path, and there stands the nutrition centre, the place where between 12 and 1 pm staff, volunteers, youth and community members congregate to eat a lunch of soup, two salads and freshly squeezed juice (with tablespoons of sugar added individually afterwards), direct from the centre’s garden.

Advance to August 2013 when I made a brief follow-up visit post fieldwork: fresh paint now covers the buildings with a new Wan Smolbag Theatre sign at the *haos*, new black silhouettes, the red AusAID kangaroo logo and monograms of AusAID and NZAid on the *yut senta* walls. A new, larger KPH clinic is being built at the back of the *haos* and shelter covers the walkway between the *haos* and the middle building.
Renovated studios fill the dilapidated shed, including the pottery studio, where youth sell their works to the public. In the heat the staff attend Zumba classes, now open to everyone, and further down the road at the Mele Beach Bar, a group of WSB youth, called *Vanua Fire*, performs circus and fire tricks with a turquoise ocean background in front of tourists. This group also performs at other functions and are starting to travel to other Pacific Islands to perform. Nearby WSB youth can also take swimming lessons and enter races. This is only one of three WSB bases in Vanuatu, the other two lie in Laganville, on Santo and in Halulua, in Pentecost. While much smaller, these two bases have their own Yut Sentas, with accompanying theatre groups and KPH clinics.\(^8\)

WSB did not begin like this. In fact, as the previous chapter mentions, its origins lie in Africa, via the United Kingdom. In the very beginning, while studying at Liverpool University, Peter Walker, the Creative Director, became active in theatre and then took a postgraduate course at East 15 Acting School in London. He first met Joanne Dorras, the scriptwriter, in Zimbabwe, as both had been posted to teach at an urban school there. They later left that school for a mission school on the Mozambique border, where they wanted to put on a play with their students but found the English in the most of the African plays was too difficult for them. The solution: write a really simple play. This spawned further plays, adapted from books the students read from South Africa or about topics relating to the local area. From this, a theatre group emerged. The group toured around the country, to Botswana, and to schools in the

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\(^8\) In the final weeks of my candidature, Category 5 Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu. Port Vila, along with the rest of the country, suffered terribly and I have no knowledge yet of how WSB fared. This environmental disaster is a reminder that, of the many development issues listed above, environmental issues, including the potential effects of climate change (and the responsibility of countries such as Australia, which have carbon-intensive economies to do something about the impact of climate change on small Pacific Island nations), are going to be increasingly important.
United Kingdom. Dorras then applied for an English teaching position at Malapoa College in Port Vila, supported by British aid money, and the couple moved to Vanuatu in the late 1980s. Meeting resistance from the teachers already in charge of drama, Walker began recruiting locals any way he could to form a theatre group and as a result, in 1989, fifteen voluntary actors formed Wan Smolbag Theatre. The local health department sponsored the first show, which they performed in the main street during the March Clean Water Week, adapting a play from Zambian group, Kanyama, highlighting sanitation issues (amid gags about diarrhoea!). The Port Vila residents found it utterly hilarious and the theatre group had found their audience.

In November of the same year, Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam Australia) provided funding that allowed four of the actors to become full-time and Vanuatu attained its first professional theatre company (J. Dorras, personal correspondence, 2011; Edgerton, 2013; P. Walker, personal correspondence, 2012; WSB, 2006). The company began touring short plays on grassroots development themes across the country and their theatrical work expanded to radio, film, television (with Love Patrol), workshops and, of course, the big play. In 1995, their first non-theatrical community work began with the Vanua-Tai (Land and Sea) turtle monitoring network in North Efate. Nineteen years later, the monitoring network holds over 500 members and the extensiveness of WSB’s on-the-ground work in the arts, health, environment, governance, youth and education within Vanuatu and the wider Pacific is staggering. WSB work with people from all walks of life: from teachers, community leaders and chiefs, to prisoners, the unemployed and children. WSB staff members have become members on local community boards and participate in international arts and AIDS conferences. Love Patrol, Vanuatu’s first television drama, is used in education programmes in PNG and Fiji, and airs right across the Pacific, including
places like Guam, and on Fiji One, Maori TV (New Zealand), ABC, SBS and NITV (Australia). The NGO recently celebrated their 25th Anniversary in 2014 with festivities such as an International Theatre Festival and a parade right through town. As WSB actor, Danny Marcel, quipped in a keynote address at the 5th World Arts Summit in Melbourne, “[The NGO] has grown out of its Wan Smolbag and now needs ‘one big bag’” (ABC, 2011).

The success of WSB can be attributed to numerous factors. This factors include the drive and commitment of CEO Michael Tauratoko, Walker, Dorras, staff and volunteers; long-term funding support from AusAID and NZAid; the relatable, culturally appropriate theatre, radio, film and television programmes produced; the large amount of research done for projects; the courage to delve into sensitive issues; and the passion to empower Pacific communities. Nonetheless, the most important factor has been the community response, not only within performances, but also in actioning solutions after the performances and getting involved. Vanua’Tai, for instance, derived from an environmental play on turtles, which toured round villages in Efate and the 1997 Blacksands Community Play, involving 80 members of the Blacksands settlement, instigated the first KPH clinic and Wan Smolbag Kids Theatre which predates the Yut Senta.

Over the years, WSB has worked hard, and continues to work hard, to achieve short-term and long-term finance and resources for these projects, including finding land, maintaining buildings, buying equipment and providing employment. A four year Tripartite Partnership between AusAID, NZAid and Wan Smolbag of VT535, 801,459 (approximately AU$6.37 million) covers the core running costs of the NGO. This support relieves some of the frustration and uncertainties associated with project-
based grants, enabling the NGO to pursue additional sponsorship, beyond the support of AusAID and NZAid, as and where needed. This extra sponsorship comes from sources such as the Vanuatu Government’s Ministry of Health, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the European Union (EU), Oxfam Australia, South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SREP), the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA), and the volunteer agencies Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) and Volunteers for Intercultural and Definitive Adventures (VIDA Volunteer), amongst others. Additionally, in 2011, AusAID bought the lease of the Port Vila centre for WSB, ensuring the land would continue to service the youth of the area for generations to come. AusAID also used to provide extra funding for *Love Patrol*, which fed into the rest of the yearly work and gave actors and technicians a full year of employment. In a country with a sometimes disturbing reputation for corruption, WSB provides transparency and accountability in their handling of finances and wages. Beginner actors and full-time tutors receive VT30,000 per month and mid-level actors receive VT45,000\(^9\) (Edgerton, 2013, p. 87). In fact, WSB is so responsible in their financial management that AusAID and NZAid has often allowed WSB to retain any unspent grant money at the end of the financial year because the aid agencies know it will be used wisely (Edgerton, 2013, p. 87).

The two GOs also give flexibility to WSB to change aspects of their projects and the M&E reports required of the company have begun to steer away from narrow “Social Return on Investment” style evaluations. Amongst the quantitative data, the 2011 Wan Smolbag Theatre Tripartite Annual Report presents the planned projects for the year along with individual descriptions on how the project was conducted and

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\(^9\) Minimum wage in Vanuatu rose from VT20,000 per month (approximately AU$230) to VT30,000 (approximately AU$350) in 2012 (Vanuatu Daily Post, 2012).
who was involved. The goal for the media production section of the NGO was to maintain and strengthen “[t]he high quality and reach of live theatre, film, radio productions and supporting publications on contemporary development issues” (WSB, 2011, p. 19). The favourable report placed Zero Balans at the top of the list with references to its high quality production, the phenomenal audience response, press coverage, and Facebook interaction (WSB, 2011). As the 2011 Annual Report does not table the money disbursed for each project, a guideline for the cost of a big play can be found in the 2010 Financial Report, which budgeted VT6,268,920 (approximately AU$73,000) for the productions of 40 Dei in both Luganville and Port Vila (WSB, 2010, p. 1).10

The success of WSB’s work has further attracted overseas media interest and academic scholarship. Al Jazeera English’s Witness television programme reported on the NGO (MacCarthy, 2007a, 2007b). As well as covering the NGO in small radio or online news articles, the ABC has produced a four-episode documentary on WSB, presented by Robyn Archer (2010), for its Arts programme. Sei Kosuga (2012) from Osaka University writes of WSB in a publication on theatre and community in Oceania. A reference to the participatory practices of WSB can be found in Sloman’s argument for the use of participatory theatre within international community development (2012). While Archer recognises the artistic skill and craftsmanship of the actors within the WSB Theatre Company, it is the scholarship of Ian Gaskell and Robin Taylor (2004, 2007) and Robyn Drysdale (2014) that this thesis so readily

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10 The spending came under the budget by VT18,138 (approximately AU$200). While the figure of $73,000 sounds like a lot of money to spend on a piece of theatre in a developing country, this figure sounds much more reasonable when one considers the large cast and crew that were involved, how long they rehearsed, their long performance season in Port Vila and the fact they also took 40 Dei to Luganville for an extended season.
complements. In their article “Getting the Message”, Gaskell and Taylor (2004) trial alternative ways of measuring audience responses to the small travelling plays. Within these experimentations they find that for TfD to be successful it “requires a minimum standard of artistic quality, without which it cannot gather an audience and hold its attention” (2004, p. 10). In their next phase of research, Gaskell and Taylor (2007) focus on how the artistic craftsmanship of the company strongly contributes towards the success of the small plays within villages across the country.

In 2014, Drysdale completed a doctoral dissertation on the role *Love Patrol* plays in the HIV response within Vanuatu, Fiji and PNG. In this dissertation, she distinguishes that *Love Patrol* is unique amongst HIV awareness media in the Pacific. This is because rather than taking the form of an information campaign led by outside experts, as most other projects do, *Love Patrol* is produced by local people, who create “culturally embedded” narratives, filled with local circumstances, characters and perspectives. The *Love Patrol* narrative is also written in a way to reduce the cultural stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS and other sexual topics, and to produce dialogue amongst its Melanesian viewers (see Forsyth, 2014 for more detail).

Gaskell, Taylor and Forsyth’s work support the research and analysis of this thesis, but none extensively examine the aesthetics of their respective performative mediums or any of the big plays.

So far, WSB has produced fifteen big plays; beginning with *Old Stories* in 1991 and most recently in 2014 with *Laef I Swit* (*Life is Sweet*). In 2004, WSB began to take the plays to Luganville every two years. Since 2007, 7-10% of the 44,039 population of Port Vila has watched the big plays each year, with 3,892 members of the public and
600 secondary school students watching *Zero Balans* in 2011.\(^1\) Although each play differs, all are pre-scripted, full-length narratives, which incorporate music, singing, original sets, props, costumes, sound, lighting and a seated audience. The WSB Theatre Company (with help from WSB travelling theatre group *Helt Fors*) produces the performances each year. Most often, but not always, these productions involve a large, diverse cast. *Zero Balans* was comprised of fifteen main actors, two on-stage musicians, eight *Helt Fors* actors playing villagers and two crewmen. The cast and crew ranged from twenty-years old to the elderly *abu* and hailed from different islands within Vanuatu, with a few who had Australian and Papua New Guinean heritage. The company relishes the challenge of a big production and the ability to tackle the complexities of issues within contemporary Vanuatu in an in-depth way. *Zero Balans* became the first of WSB’s big plays to delve into political corruption, specifically in regards to land, at a time when they felt “the political scene [was] arguably at its most volatile since Independence” (WSB, 2011, p. 19). Other linking issues concerning gender inequality, unemployment and the Wantok system also feature.

**A Brief Synopsis of the Play, Zero Balans**\(^2\)

With each new play, Dorras initiates the scriptwriting process and in the case of *Zero Balans* she began by writing from the point of view of a dying woman, “looking at the world around her and how it was disintegrating and how all the land was going” (Personal communication, May 11, 2011). However, after writing the meeting scene

\(^1\) Other examples of Port Vila audience numbers include: *Las Kad* in 2007 with 3,150 (WSB, 2007, p.5); *40 Dei* in 2009 with over 3,500 (WSB, 2009, p. 1); and *40 Dei* in 2010 with 4346 (WSB, 2010, p. 3). Luganville has figures of up to 25% of the 13,156 residents watching (3317) (WSB, 2010, p. 3).

\(^2\) A more detailed scene-by-scene synopsis is found in the appendix.
in the second half of the play where the Prime Minister and Ministers of Parliament, Derrick, Pierre and Ezekiel, discuss selling the land of Lagun Saed (Lagoon Side) to foreign investors, she altered the play and changed the protagonist to Ezekiel, one of the corrupt politicians. We first meet Ezekiel in the second scene of the play, at the funeral of an Abu in the peri-urban settlement he represents called Lagun Saed. His wife Rita calls him on his mobile about a newspaper article detailing the antics of “a politician” and two Thai women at an overseas conference. He rushes home to calm his furious wife, but they fight and she leaves him, triggering a severe heart attack. In the hospital, two angels (or god-like figures) visit Ezekiel on his deathbed and say he can live if he proves he is wan gud fella man (a good man). From this point, Ezekiel takes the angles and the audience back in time to the beginning of his election, the negotiations of portfolio positions, and the demands from the Lagun Saed community and Rita, the shady deals to obtain extra cash for such demands, his affair with Lisa, a young lady from the settlement, and his estrangement from Rita. Alas, Ezekiel cannot prove he is a good man. Nevertheless, at the end of the first half of the play, the angels give him a second chance: to find one person who thinks he is a good man. Easy! The second act begins with a meeting between the Prime Minister, two politicians and Ezekiel about stealthily selling the land Lagun Saed sits on to foreign investors. Ezekiel agrees to sign the contract only if the three politicians swear that he is a good man. Before they do, thunder and lightning from the angels stops them in their tracks—Ezekiel cannot barter for a declaration. Ezekiel then spends the rest of the second act trying to win back the favour of everybody he knows so that they will say he is a good man. At a Lagun Saed fundraiser he tries to retrieve VT100,000 from the ATM to give to the community, only to find Rita has taken all the money from their bank account. He promises to the community that he
will give them the money later. Later during the fundraiser, the national radio reports of his love affair and his sacking by the government, a decision announced by the Prime Minister. Ezekiel then confesses to the community about the foreign development plan and that they will be evicted from their homes in one month. 

*Lagun Saed* disowns him. Nevertheless, Lisa, despite all the pain he has caused her, tells him he is a good man. With renewed confidence, Ezekiel fights the development process, but is too late. The community pack up all their belongings and wander off the stage into the unknown, leaving Ezekiel pleading to the heavens to show him how to be a better man.

**Multiple Migrations and the Diversity of Vanuatu**

To understand the depth and reach of *Zero Balans* and WSB’s other work with Vanuatu communities, one needs to understand the socio-cultural, economic and political context of the island nation. Social scientist William Miles highlights the “politically delicate undertaking” and the “bridging” of mental boundaries that a researcher must go through when operating in Vanuatu, tacking between “Francophones and Anglophones, Catholics and Protestants, Europeans and Melanesians, Australians and Australophobes, white settlers and black nationalists, religious missionaries and secular developmentalists, accredited diplomats and outer islanders” (1998, p. xix). Yet, Miles’ summary—he would concede this—only barely touches upon the diversity found in Vanuatu. The Vietnamese, for instance, were not referred to, not to mention the diversity found within each of these groups of people. Miranda Forsyth also writes of the “many pluralities” (2009, p. 2) in the country. How did this come to be? Colonisation of the archipelago by Britain and France, World War II and the posting of American soldiers, independence and the
need for foreign aid, development and investment have all played a role. However, the archipelago already held a multiplicity of cultures well before the first European contact in 1606 by a Spanish ship captained by Pedro-Fernande de Quiros.

Archaeologist José Garanger writes,

> Archaeological research...is revealing the extreme complexity of [Melanesia, Samoa and Tonga’s] processes of settlement, a large number of the factors of which remain very obscure. This is particularly the case in Vanuatu, the cross-roads of settlement routes and of the inter-island networks of relations and exchange characteristic of pre-European Pacific societies. (1996, p. 10)

Archaeologists and linguists have traced one main migration route through the Pacific, made by the Austronesians. Beginning in Taiwan approximately 5000 to 6000 years ago, this sea faring people reached Vanuatu just over 3,000 years ago (Garanger, 1996; MacClancy, 1981; Tryon, 1996). Other identifications include more migratory movements from the West just after 1000AD, and Polynesian interactions with, and migration to, the central islands from 800AD and from the 1600s have also been identified. According to Bonnemaison, recorded oral traditions from the central and southern islands seem to align with these migration movements (Bonnemaison, 1996, p. 212; Rawlings, 1999). Another oral tradition, one that I heard in person, came from the actor in Zero Balans who played Abu, the “grandfather” (but the term is also used to designate a respected elder, as indeed this actor was for his fellow
performers who referred to him as Abu both on stage and off).\textsuperscript{13} \textsuperscript{14} Abu comes from Tongoa, in the Shepherd Islands (central Vanuatu). One night he gave me a long, oral history of how his ancestors travelled from Madagascar, the westernmost part of Austronesia, past New Zealand and up to Vanuatu.

One predominant sensibility that has passed down from the Austronesian ancestors into ni-Vanuatu culture is the metaphor of the tree and the canoe, enabling the longevity and adaptability of \textit{kastom}. Joël Bonnemaison explains its meaning:

\[T\]hey are as much people of voyage as of roots, people of place as much as peoples of roads.

The Melanesian metaphor expresses this duality of origin. Man is a tree, but the local group is a canoe. Man’s identity is given by his place, but his canoe draws him along the roads. The canoe only exists thanks to the strength of the wood of the tree whence it is hollowed-out – it thus rests on the roots of the tree – but its destiny is to follow a route leading from place to place, from island to island. It thus possesses a mobile value, a “wandering territory”, which weaves links between implanted local groups. (\textsc{1996b}, p.35; see also Bonnemaison & Pénot-Demetry, 1994)

Although scholars do not know the exact history, eventually migrants settled into autonomous villages across the archipelago. For that reason, villages did not

\textsuperscript{13} In the thesis I will refer to the fictional character of Abu in \textit{Zero Balans} with italics, i.e. “Abu”. The real-life person Abu (the actor, the elder in the company), will be referred to in plain script, i.e. “Abu”. I acknowledge that there is obviously some potential slippage between the actor’s social self and their role (a point to which I will return to in Chapter Five).

\textsuperscript{14} Apart from Peter Walker, Joanne Dorras, Titus and Helen, the rest of the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company and \textit{Helt Fors} members are de-identified as per the conditions of their consent and the requirements of the research protocol approved by the University of Sydney Ethics Committee.
necessarily understand one another and thus communicated through interceding neighbours. Garanger informs that this created "a series of linguistic chains, which also correspond to inter-island exchange networks" (1996, p. 10). Even though the number of languages has reduced to just over one hundred, Vanuatu currently contains one of the highest language concentrations in the world (Forsyth, 2009; Tryon, 1996).

Broadly speaking, family lineages constructed the parameters of a village and they lived in hamlets, with the size, assembly and materials of a village depending on the geography and social structures of the family (Coiffer, 2006; Rawlings, 1999). Alliances formed between families for mutual protection, but, especially in the north, these groupings sometimes changed. The villagers lived off root cropping, pig breeding and exchange. Trade routes and marriage unions revolved around village and island locations, with the inter-island exchange networks normally grouping within northern, central and southern islands (Bonnemaison, 2006a). These inter-village relationships subsequently influenced the kastom of each village, including rituals and leadership structures (Huffman, 2006). Although in some cases, such as in Tanna, villages carefully guarded their rituals. Villagers in the northern islands generally earned their leadership status and climbed up social ranks by working their way through a graded system of challenges. This was aided by wealth (particularly in pigs), which was inherited, worked for or gained through sponsorship from higher ranked men. In the central and southern islands, leadership titles were passed down through matrilineal lineages. However in reality, personality and skill sometimes came into play. A strong knowledgeable personality could usurp the line and be elected by the village, or an adopted child could receive
the title (Bonnemaison, 2006a). Overall, Miles reports that “[i]dentity in precontact Oceania was remarkably nonethnic in basis. Distinctions were based on locality and genealogy, and sometimes on bush-coastal differences .... Previously, personhood was a matter of interlinking relationships and ‘shared biographies’” (1998, p. 81).

The next migration, of traders and missionaries from Europe, Australia, New Caledonia and other areas of the Pacific, led to the kastom of villages evolving further. From the 1820s, whalers, then traders and sea cucumber harvesters entered the archipelago’s waters. The first missionaries arrived in 1839 in the form of John Williams from the London Missionary Society and a group of Polynesian teachers. Williams was killed as he disembarked onto Erromango, and from the 1840s to the 1860s Samoan and Rarotongans primarily converted ni-Vanuatu in the central islands. (Also the Aneityumese, from a small island south below Tanna, had significant influence on coastal villages in Efate.) From the 1860s, British and French settlers arrived and together with Australia and New Caledonia pushed the British and French governments to annex the islands. The two governments formed a condominium called the New Hebrides in 1906 (originally named by Captain James Cook in 1774) and consolidated it with the Anglo-French Protocol in 1914.

The degree of evolution of the villages instigated by the new migrants depended on the location of the villages, their degree of exposure, and their acceptance, compliance or resistance to Western culture. It depended also on whether the villagers were dissatisfied with their current situation and wanted change, or were receptive to foreign ideas (Philibert, 1981). Incidentally, as the resources of the condominium were not extensive, inland bush villages and those far away in the outer islands had greater opportunities, compared to other groups, to ignore or, at
least, operate beyond the reach of the new colonial powers. But, just as importantly, even though the nature of kastom is perceived to be ever-present, flexible and evolving, words such as “loss” and “destruction” have been more commonly used by ni-Vanuatu to describe this chapter in history.

The new inhabitants introduced new economies, food, materials, clothing, cultures and spiritualities. The economy moved from subsistence crops, shells and pig breeding to cash cropping and migratory male wage labour. Foreign goods and services entered the market, including rice and flour. For those closer to the centre of colonial activity new services included sanitation, health and school facilities. New diseases (dysentery, whooping cough and influenza), firearms, alcohol and the recruiting and “blackbirding”\textsuperscript{15} of men to work in plantations on other islands of the archipelago, New Caledonia, Fiji and Queensland depopulated islands (Bonnemaison & Pénot-Demetry, 1994; Rawlings, 1999). By the 1920s, the ni-Vanuatu population of 600,000-800,000 had been decimated to 40,000 (Dorney, 2013; Huffman, 2013). Interior island villages re-located to the coast for trade and to live near missionaries, either alienating the land or selling it. For instance, Bufa, an inland village in Efate, sold all its land to copra and cattle plantation owners. Other coastal villages, such as Pango in Efate, combined their small, spread-out settlements into one nuclear village. The mass migrations caused by the labour trade and missionaries affected the structure of communities and their kinship systems. In Efate, instead of women marrying outside of their clan and relocating to the village of their husband, men moved to a new village for plantation work, married a woman in the village, and remained with her family. In some cases, missionaries could also influence the

\textsuperscript{15} Involuntary recruitment, in other words: kidnapping.
choice of chief and change the lineage from which the chiefdom came. The
missionaries’ general inability to be affected by black magic devalued the authority
of the chiefs in some areas. Villages began to choose leaders on attributes such as
being multilingual, devoted to Christianity or knowledgeable in certain Western
practices to help negotiations (Rawlings, 1999).

Furthermore, the New Hebrides had three administrations: one British, one French
and one joint. The country ran with three judicial systems, two education systems,
two health systems and two currencies. The division between the two nations never
explicitly partitioned the country but was geographically random: the position of a
Protestant or Catholic school or mission and the concentration of a given nationality
gave an area a more Anglophone or Francophone flavour. Ni-Vanuatu became
Anglophones or Francophiles depending on their connections, which area they lived
in, or which school they attended (Miles, 1998).16 But, overall ni-Vanuatu were
stateless as neither administration gave the indigenous inhabitants any legal rights;
that is, ni-Vanuatu were stateless until independence.

Two other nationalities also affected the archipelago: the Indochinese and the
Americans. With the ni-Vanuatu refusal to join the labour force on plantations, from
1921 to 1940, French plantation owners recruited 21, 922 Indochinese, mainly from
the Tonkin Province (Vietnam), to work. In 1945, the “coolies” became independent
workers, organising their own contracts and unions and working as shopkeepers,
tradesmen and the first taxi drivers. 397 Indochinese stayed in the New Hebrides
after the closure of the plantation contracts in 1963 and around 1000 Vietnamese

16 Many Melanesian parents, who were able to, strategically sent half their children to a British school
and half to a French school to cover all bases if there was a political shift.
continue to live in Vanuatu. World War II saw over 100,000 American GIs posted to the New Hebrides. The state-of-the-art transportation, communications, infrastructure and belongings, which the small British and French administrations could not financially muster, impressed ni-Vanuatu and kindled cargo cults.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, the GIs created more employment for those living close to their camps and provided more widespread access to rice and canned fish and beef, thus influencing a new diet. They further introduced ni-Vanuatu to popular Western genres of music and instruments such as guitars and ukuleles. Lastly, the reputation for friendliness of the Americans, in comparison to the colonisers, and the fact of seeing black men in uniform, also planted a small seed aiding the growth of the movement for freedom and independence of the indigenous people. This seed fully bloomed on the 30\textsuperscript{th} of July 1980, when Vanuatu became an independent country.

The introduction of individualism by the missionaries (though not necessarily self-interest) and materialism by other colonial sources and the Americans created, and continues to cause, friction with traditional ni-Vanuatu collectivism and communalism. Miles comments that individualism also “thrust into the consciousness” of ni-Vanuatu, a “we-they” dualism and an objectification of ethnic groups (1998, p. 81). In a bid to unite the nation in the lead up to independence, Father Walter Lini and the \textit{Vanua’aku Pati} (Our Land Party), focused on Christianity and more importantly, \textit{kastom}, and a resurgence of indigenous values and practices ensued. Consequently, governance of the newly established country centred on two

\textsuperscript{17} One of the more widely known cargo cults in Vanuatu is the John Frum movement (see Bonnemaison & Pénot-Demetry, 1994).
national systems: the Westminster System and the Malvatumaui National Council of Chiefs, in other words, law and *kastom*.

**The Effects of Rural to Urban Migration on Port Vila**

The Capital of Port Vila was originally a colonial settlement. British, French, German and Australian settlers established Vila on land owned by Pango, Ifira and Erakor villages, and located near it Mele, and Mele Maat. In the 1880s, it became a commercial and planting centre. Later in 1906, with the establishment of the New Hebrides condominium, Port Vila turned into the centre for colonial activity. British and French administrators and more settlers arrived to total 200 residents, infrastructure began to develop and ni-Vanuatu were only granted restricted access to the colonial town. It was not until the 1950s that the administrations loosened their restrictions on the indigenous people accessing Port Vila. In the 1960s and 70s, the administrations began to increase spending, expanded the economy and made the New Hebrides a tax haven. Ni-Vanuatu, from all islands, began to travel from their home villages to Port Vila for short periods of time to earn cash. The town’s population rose to 8,000 in 1970 and to 16,000 in 1980. Independence and a further liberalisation and centralisation of the economy created more work opportunities in Vila, increasing rural to urban migration, and migrants began to stay long-term. By the 2009 census, 44,039 people lived in Port Vila, with the intense urbanisation of Port Vila stretching its land and employment resources. Most of the island migrants settled, and still settle, in peri-urban settlements on the outskirts of town. As Forsyth describes, “These are often squatter communities where people from different islands live in houses patched together with corrugated iron and scrap materials, often without water, electricity or sanitation” (2009, p. 5). A major factor
contributing towards such conditions has been the lack of affordable, legal land and housing made available for the influx of migrants to lease. The informal setting of the settlements means land owners are not legally required to provide the infrastructure or services needed for the communities, although some do, and can mediate with their insecure tenants on their own terms. Today, the high levels of migration have also resulted in the work supply outstripping demand. Families struggle to pay for food, rented rooms and schooling.\(^{18}\) Despite struggling to pay for such necessities, mobile phones are increasingly popular and bright telecommunication umbrella stands litter the city selling “top-up” vouchers. Most of the long-term rural-to-urban migrants have formed communities amongst their fellow islanders in a settlement, with a chief, elders and their own kastom, while keeping close ties with their home island and village. This formation has contributed towards and strengthened island identification. Because of this strong identification and the fact that the migrants do not live on their own land, most residents will not say they are “\textit{man Vila}” (from Port Vila), but rather identify themselves by their home island. Indeed, in the programme for \textit{Zero Balans}, the actors and crew identify which island, and sometimes which village, they come from. Despite such strong identification with their home islands, different island communities do live together in the same peri-urban settlements alongside newcomers. Inter-island marriages and the resulting children are beginning to blur island boundaries and a new generation born and living in Vila are creating new, ni-Vanuatu identities.

\(^{18}\text{The government spends VT5000 a year on each child for primary school education. This amount does not cover all their educational costs, including uniforms, books, stationery and transport. Secondary School is not free and costs between VT1700-2600 per term (Edgerton, 2013, p. 89). The minimum wage is VT30,000 per month. (Note: VT = vatu; the national currency of Vanuatu.)}\)
For those who have been educated, especially at university (including gaining scholarships to study in Fiji, Australia and New Zealand), and who have obtained professional and managerial positions, it is a different story. Slowly, an educated, middle-class is beginning to grow in Vila, drinking coffee in cafés like Au Pêche Mignon in the early morning and dining at restaurants on the waterfront on the weekends. In the last five years kastom owners just outside of Vila have developed land into subdivisions specifically for this rising group of ni-Vanuatu to lease. Priced at AU$10,000-15,000 per block, the buyers may not be able to build straightaway but can later hire a building company which has prepared basic, affordable designs (N. Hamilton, personal communication, August 24, 2013). Developments like this have long been in demand. The next section discusses in detail some of the many land-related issues in the country and the central role land plays in the identity of ni-Vanuatu.
“The Land Belongs to Us” versus “We Belong to the Land”

Figure 3. A Custom Land Sign in Mele, Efate
“A custom land owner from Mele is making his point in no uncertain terms on this sign near Hideaway landing”
Vanuatu Daily Post, 2011, April 28, p. 3.

Land has been the predominant issue within Vanuatu for a long time. The name Vanuatu, given on independence, means “Our Land Forever” or “Land That Stands Up”. The latter of these notions has, at times, translated into direct political action, as in the case of the famous activist, Jimmy Stevens.

There were big problems in the country, especially the land problem the white and black people. There’s a whole history involved with land, but to the “black pikinini”, land is a mother to them. And the Blackman recognised that they had no power at all to protect their own land. Although they were bush people they knew that their land was being taken away all the time by the law of the two governments, of 1914. White men were making profit from the land, but the black people were not getting anything. (Stevens in Plant & Kele-Kele, 1977, p. 35)
The condominium was essentially formed to protect British and French citizens, their companies and the land they “bought” from ni-Vanuatu (Bonnemaison & Pénot-Demetry, 1994). Land was thus the key issue that spurred the independence movements of the Nagriamel, led by Jimmy Stevens, and the Vanua’aku Pati, led by Father Lini. At independence, the constitution returned all land back to the original kastom owners and their descendants. The new government carefully negotiated this handover by allowing the previous owners of land plots (i.e. the British and the French) to transfer their “ownership” into a long-term lease. No longer was there any freehold land in Vanuatu. Land became communally owned again, where the oral kastom of the owners form the basis for their land ownership and use. In addition, the constitution made land inalienable and kastom owners could only sell their land to the State for public interest or negotiate leases of up to 75 years. Landowners are entitled to negotiate the leases for their own benefits, with land dealings involving non-indigenous citizens and foreigners requiring government consent. In the case of State owned land, the Minister of Lands is the lessor, and until recently, could also sign on behalf of unidentified kastom owners of alienated land still under dispute. Since independence, 98% of Vanuatu remains as customary land with 2% belonging to the State, including much of Port Vila (Ballard, Fingleton & Naupa, 2008). Additionally, 55% of all customary land on Efate, and 80% of coastal land, holds long-term leases, where expatriates often develop beachfront properties and resorts.

Ni-Vanuatu hold a spiritual bond with their land. For them land is more than a source of food, provision, inheritance, security and identity. As the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (PIPP) identifies, people see “themselves as inseparable from their
place” and they “belong to the land” (2014, para. 6). Land is also the biggest employer of ni-Vanuatu, and their society has historically revolved around communal self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, the new constitution and the returning of land to the indigenous owners introduced ni-Vanuatu to another form of economy. Kastom owners were now able to quickly earn money off their land and could easily be enticed by foreign developers with wads of cash wanting to lease their properties. The problem was, and still is, that the leasing of the land by the (often older) kastom owners has the real potential to benefit only a few families and leave future generations without access to their land for up to 75 years. Furthermore, up until 2014, the Vanuatu constitution provided loopholes for bribery and corruption to easily take place, providing quick cash for individual politicians. Two particular aspects of the law contributed to this persistent corruption within the government. The Minister of Lands could sign and approve a lease with few conditions or legal accountability. As customary land is not always legally registered, finding and proving the right kastom owner for a piece of land can prove difficult and the Minister of Lands could take personal advantage as the signing authority for unknown kastom owners. Expatriates could also pay an elder to act and sign as the kastom owner and then pay the corrupt Lands Minister, who signed the contract off. Once the lease is signed and sealed it becomes a major process for the rightful landowners to get the contract surrendered. The rightful landowners must prove that they are actually the landowners and not the signing elder, which can become quite difficult (Hamilton, personal communication, August 24, 2013).

19 In August 2013, a land case was going through the State courts on 20 hectares of land on the waterfront in Havana, Efate. The large piece of land was a particular prime spot because the waterfront had deep water. A Frenchman “with a reputation” found an elder to sign the lease contract as the kastom owner and paid him a pile of cash. Hamilton believes the amount of cash was between AU$50,000-100,000. The Frenchman then paid the corrupt Lands Minister, who signed the contract off. Once the lease is signed and sealed it becomes a major process for the rightful landowners to get the contract surrendered. The rightful landowners must prove that they are actually the landowners and not the signing elder, which can become quite difficult (Hamilton, personal communication, August 24, 2013).
responded by calling Land Summits in 2006 and 2009. Both summits produced strong recommendations to the government, including the obtaining of signatures from the whole village before a land-lease could be approved, but subsequent action did not follow.

In 2011, the year of the play *Zero Balans*, the former Director General of Lands Joe Ligo presented a report to Prime Minister Sato Kilman, of the *Vanua’aku Pati*, detailing widespread corruption in the Ministry and Department of Lands going back years and implicating former ministers and senior land officials (Van Trease, 2012). Ligo warned that tension was high among ni-Vanuatu over land deals that had gone through without the proper consent of *kastom* owners, and who had lost their land in corrupt dealings. The Ligo report created a significant stir within the community and media. Media outlets, such as the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, published copious numbers of articles of evidence of land corruption, including criticism of Tanna MP Harry Iauko’s handling of land issues while the Minister of Lands for five months in 2009. In particular it broke the story that Iauko as the Minister of Lands had leased the rundown Marina Motel, a waterfront property in Port Vila town, to a political ally for a little over VT5million (approximately AU$58,000), who then on sold the lease for over VT50million (approximately AU$584,000). The publisher of the *Daily Post* Marc Neil-Jones writes, “Had [the property] gone to tender as it should have the government would have received much needed revenue and not a pittance”

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20 The Minister at the time, Regenvanu (in his first posting as Lands Minister) responded by putting land dealings on hold in order to change procedures. Consequently government leadership shifted him to the Justice portfolio. Regenvanu had written a publication in the *Journal of South Pacific Law* title “Issues with Land Reform in Vanuatu” (2008). It is purported that Government leadership removed Regenvanu three times from a portfolio position because of his integrity.

21 AusAID also reported that in 2011, they began a land initiative called *Mama Graon* (“Mother Land”) with the Vanuatu government. During the first twelve weeks of the land initiative the Land Minister position changed six times (AusAID, 2012, p. 11).
Knowledge of Iauko’s corrupt dealings were not new, but the *Daily Post* allegations struck a chord for the Minister of Public Works, and according to Howard Van Trease, on Friday the 4th of March 2011, Iauko “led a group of men to the office of the... *Daily Post*, assaulted the publisher, Marc Neil-Jones, and threatened the editor and the other staff over articles published in the newspaper” (2012, p. 415). However, because of their unstable numbers the Kilman government refused to discipline or sack Iauko. Instead, the government only warned that those who print such kinds of material must be prepared to face the backlash. It was not until late June of 2011 that the courts charged and fined Iauko and his group. Incidentally, Iauko suffered a heart attack during the April rehearsals of *Zero Balans*, a remarkable coincidence considering Ezekiel, the corrupt political protagonist in the play, also suffers from a heart attack. While audiences would not have missed the parallels, it should be stressed that this idea had already been written into the script well before Iauko’s heart attack. The land lease corruption in Vanuatu unearths multiple stories in the media and community and the character of Ezekiel in the play has many predecessors. As Iauko was considered particularly dangerous, his actions were not discussed in the rehearsals. The director was concerned that if word got out that they were discussing these sorts of things, especially with the coincidence of the heart attack, Iauko’s political faction might shut the play or the NGO down.  

In December 2011, the government passed the Customary Land Tribunal Act in which land disputes were to be addressed at the local level rather than in the State Courts. This made it much easier to resolve disputes, as each village has their own

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22 Iauko died in December 2012. His Tanna electorate then elected his son Pascal Iauko in his place, and today there is still an “Iauko Group” of MPs within the *Vanua’aku Pati*. 

(The Pacific Islands Media Association [PIMA], 2011, para. 1).
kastom for dealing with land issues. In December 2011, after the Zero Balans performances, the government passed the Customary Land Tribunal Act in which land disputes were to be addressed at the local level rather than in the State Courts. This made it much easier to resolve disputes, as each village has their own kastom for dealing with land issues. Nonetheless, the Act did not address the source of the corruption. Following a third summit, working groups and a nationwide consultation tour in 2013, Ralph Regenvanu, the Minister of Lands again, pushed through a new National Land Law package, which the government gazetted and made law in February 2014. The Customary Land Management Act established, among other things, that the Minister of Lands could no longer sign on behalf of disputing kastom owner groups without consent of the disputing parties, or create leases over state land without the approval of the Council of Ministers and other relevant authorities, including kastom owner groups. The Act further required a nakamal meeting with the whole community to discuss and sign off on all land decisions (new leases, developments, access, environmental safeguards et cetera). Despite Regenvanu’s good intentions, the new Customary Land Management Act received plenty of criticism from the public, chiefs and the opposition. In particular, because the rush to gazette the package in the midst of the government facing a no confidence vote dramatically cut the consultation time between passing and making it law. Regenvanu accepted such criticisms and the need for further work on the issues (see PIPP, 2014 for more detail). Then, on the 15th of May 2014, Regenvanu and his Graon mo Jastis Pati (Land and Justice Party), along with other parties, defected from the

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23 The nakamal means the meeting house. In Port Vila, it can also be referred to as a kava bar. But in regards to the new Customary Land Management Act, the nakamal refers to a customary institution, operating as a seat of governance for a particular area, in which men, women and children all come under the governance jurisdiction (PIPP, 2014).
Green Confederation coalition and joined the opposition in placing a vote of no confidence on the Moana Carcasses Kalosil-led government. Regenvanu retained his position as the Minister of Lands under a new coalition government, led by Joe Natuman of the Vanua’aku Pati. A feat not unusual in Vanuatu politics as the following section will explain in further detail.

**The Politicking of Politics**

![Figure 4. A Political Cartoon from the Vanuatu Daily Post](Vanuatu Daily Post, November 9, 2012)

Needless to say, Vanuatu politics is a complicated affair—an interplay of local issues and personalities, emanating in part from centuries-old traditions, and recent historical events (Van Trease, 1995, p. xviii).

As mentioned earlier, at independence, Vanuatu became a democratic republic and adopted the Westminster System of parliament. From its inception until the 1991 elections, the *Vanua’aku Pati* won the clear majority of elections and led the country with its founding father, Father Walter Lini. In the lead up to the 1991 elections,

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24 The politician on the exercycle closely resembles Ralph Regenvanu.
politics began to revolve around the Melanesian “big man” form of leadership.

Large political parties fragmented, and the 1991 elections saw more parties contending with no clear majority leader. The Union of Moderate Parties, a Francophone party, and the National United Party, newly formed by Lini after his defection from the VP, aligned to lead the country. Howard Van Trease explains:

In one way, the 1991 election can be described as the return to a more Melanesian style of politics in Vanuatu in which the extreme diversity of the population – 105 different languages in a population of just over 150,000 dispersed over a multitude of islands – and significance of local personalities re-emerged to replace the artificial dominance of a single political party.

(1995, p. xviii)

Since 1991, each election has produced a coalition government. In the 2012 elections, sixteen parties and four independents won the 52 seats in parliament. The Vanua’aku Pati won the largest amount of seats – eight! Nevertheless, the People’s Progressive Party (placed second with five seats) formed the winning coalition and Sato Kilman retained his role as Prime Minister. Since 1991, and in particular since 1995, parliament has revolved around the personal politicking of the big men: fighting for portfolio positions, removing ministers from such positions, forging alliances, defecting, and voting no-confidence in the government. The local

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25 Ethnographers working in Melanesia from the 1930s to the 1960s coined the term “big man”, after being unhappy with the word “chief” to describe the leaders of a clan, tribe or village where there was not one solitary leader. Depending on the community or island and the scale of politics involved, a big man competes for and achieves his leadership status in a number of ways: through strength and physicality (as the name suggests), charisma, persuasion, knowledge, exchange, gifts, economic ability and/or through hereditary position (Allen, 1984; Lindstrom, 1981).

26 During the rehearsals and performances of *Zero Balans* in April and May of 2011 one such cycle occurred. On Thursday the 14th of April, the speaker Maxime Karlot Korman declared an opposition motion of no confidence on the Prime Minister Sato Kilman with the signatures of 27 MPs. In December 2010, Kilman as Deputy Prime Minister had as an act of personal betrayal, ousted PM Edward Natapei while he was overseas. On Easter Sunday, the 24th of April, parliament convened to vote 26 in favour and 24 against the motion of no confidence. Kilman and his group left before the
independent or small party MP, who is no longer accountable to a large party, can switch allegiances or parties and strikes deals (legal or not) to suit their own and their community’s needs and wants. Since the end of a period of stability from 11 December 2004 to 22 September 2008 with Ham Lini, a brother of Father Lini, as Prime Minister, up to the time of writing, the Vanuatu government has changed eight times with five different Prime Ministers. Apart from the costs involved, some of the biggest criticisms against such continual change are that it distracts the Members of Parliament from their actual jobs, interrupts decision-making and implementation, and consequently makes it harder for Vanuatu to progress. Michael G. Morgan points out that this is not just the politicians’ fault:

An enduring irony of Vanuatu politics is that while public criticisms of the fragmented National Parliament and apparent inertia of governments are commonplace, voters have discarded the major parties in favour of locally credible independent candidates or members of smaller parties. And it is the increasing presence of independents and smaller parties that motors political instability. (2006, p. 135)

Voters swing towards local personalities (big men), rather than major parties and their policies. A predominant factor in the voting for these local personalities, rather than for national policy, stems from the Melanesian Wantok (“One Talk”) system, a socio-economic and political Melanesian system that occurs at a local, island and

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second session in which Mr. Rialuth Serge Vohor was voted in as Prime Minister. The Kilman Group immediately lodged a constitutional case with the Supreme Court, to which Justice Vincent Lunabok ruled against them and declared the motion of no confidence legally valid. Kilman then turned to the Court of Appeal who overturned the decision on the 13th of May, on the grounds that 26 votes did not constitute a majority (Binihi, 2011, April 15, April 25; Van Trease, 2012). In March 2013, re-elected Prime Minister Kilman resigned before parliament was to debate and vote on its 7th motion of no confidence on him and his government. The motion of no confidence was put forward by Ralph Regenvanu for the failure of Kilman to stop the corruption within the government and “high levels of public service” (Younger, 2013).
national level. This term, which colloquially means “friend” or “mate” in Bislama, was thought to be introduced from the Pidgin English language *Tok Pisin* in Papua New Guinea (Crowley, 1993, p. 290). In Vanuatu, this socio-economic and political system can also be referred to as “islandism”. Forsyth’s explanation of islandism clearly explains the outworking of the *Wantok* system, except that the *Wantok* System is not restricted to just an island allegiance, but also includes people of the same language, kinship group, clan, tribe, village, church or island electorate within the country.

Forsyth writes,

> [I]slandinism is the strong sense that people must look after people from their own community in government, business and social obligations. It is often expected that when someone attains a position of power [including becoming employed by Smolbag] they will use the position to benefit people from their island, before having regard to the interests of the society as a whole. (2009, p. 3)

For these reasons, politicians then spend their time in parliament juggling to keep position in the right circle of power and please their electorate. Such negotiation further results in reluctance by many to introduce legislation or provide coherent, long-term policy that is beneficial to the whole nation, for fear it may endanger their position within parliament and their community. Some politicians take illegal

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27 I have witnessed the *Wantok* System at work in the family I lived with and at Wan Smolbag Theatre. The family were well off compared to others in the church. One day they decided to take me on a bus to tour around Efate. But once everyone else in the community found out, they wanted to go too and expected us to pay for them. They and I couldn’t afford to pay for everyone, so instead we paid for everyone to go to the beach for the afternoon. At WSB, because they have a permanent job some employees are expected to buy items for friends and family even when they cannot afford it. The publications office has banned the use of USBs as kinship groups of the workers from nearby settlements would come to the office to print out A4 posters of pop stars to put on their walls. Subsequently, the computers constantly crashed from viruses and the office went through a lot of paper and ink.
measures to retain favour with their electorate: a social reality that is echoed in in *Zero Balans* when the character Ezekiel accepts a bribe from another politician to sign a document for cash so that the chief of *Lagun Saed* can build the church. In a 2011 Letter to the Editor of the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, Johnety Jerety, a political science student from the University of the South Pacific questions:

> What about the question of leadership ethics and moral? Do our leaders understand their ethics and moral principles and abide to it? What about the members of the public that we have complained a lot about [sic] our leaders involving in corruption? Didn't our Wantok system may have also contribute to force them [sic] to commit such corruptions because of the high demand we are expecting of them? (2011, p. 5)

Another political problem is that outer island electorates are continuing to re-elect old, well-known, corrupt personalities, as communication of the politicians’ corrupt activities in Luganville and Port Vila do not necessarily reach the outer villages. In a WSB tour of anti-corruption plays before the last elections, the actors encountered much wheeling and dealing amongst local politicians and villagers in these places (Walker, 2011, March 6).

While criticism can be directed at the *Wantok* system, it must be remembered that it has only been thirty-four years since ni-Vanuatu have been unified as one nation, under a Western, democratic form of governance, alongside their own varying forms of *kastom*. The *Wantok* system has ensured ni-Vanuatu survival for thousands of years, bringing security, care and reciprocity, and will continue to do so while the State, as a whole, cannot fully provide for the welfare of its citizens. Moreover, it is not easy to cater for a nation of so many different islands and cultures, and write
policies, which not only represent all of them but also bring progress to the whole of the country. As Miles acknowledges: “For all rhetoric of a ‘Pacific way’ and a ‘Melanesia way’, there remains within Vanuatu alone multiple understandings of the world and its process” (1998, p. 182).

**The Different Definitions of Development**

The preference for short-term policies for individual political interests, rather than long-term policies for national interests, is something of which bilateral donors are also aware. Donors take precautions and apply additional governance mandates to their aid and development funding. But before entering a discussion of development in Vanuatu, this section begins with an overview of foreign aid and development, particularly regarding Australia, the largest bilateral donor of foreign aid and development, and the largest source of commercial trade, investment and tourism to Vanuatu. With independence, the Vanuatu government finally had the opportunity to negotiate and partner with the international community on its own terms. To a greater extent, this was also a necessity: the poorly run condominium (often termed “the pandemonium”) left the country with a great need for aid, development and investment. To enable this, the government joined many international organisations to gain exposure, connections and help (see Philibert, 1981 more details). In a speech on the day of independence, Prime Minister Walter Lini, addressed the visiting foreign delegates,

> [B]oth financially and economically, we can expect to be less independent than many States.
We shall, for several years to come, depend on external aid, not just for capital or development needs, but for our ordinary Government services such as education, health and public works. (1982, p. 29)

While recognising they would need help for years to come, the early leaders still wanted to use foreign aid and development in such a way that they could rely upon it less and less. Yet, in 2011, the year of Zero Balans, Vanuatu received a net sum of US$92 million in Official Development Assistance (ODA) (OECD, 2013, p. 2), forming 18% of the country’s Gross National Income. The government of Australia provided over 50% of the ODA, with New Zealand, the European Union, China, Japan and France being the other top bilateral donors (AusAID, 2012, p. 1). Through its aid and development programme,AusAID, Australia partners with NZAid, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) on projects. It also works on the ground with Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and NGOs Save the Children, the Vanuatu Women’s Centre and of course, WSB. All GOs, development banks, agencies and NGOs work towards the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2015, with much focus directed towards infrastructure in terms of energy, water supply, telecommunications and transport, maritime affairs, disaster relief and economic growth (AusAID, 2012, p. 7). Australia and New Zealand provide further assistance to the law, justice and corrections departments, including the Australian Federal Police training and mentoring the Vanuatu Police Force and New Zealand assisting in prison operations,

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probation and providing a judge to sit on the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, AusAID’s 2013 report shows that 13% of the inhabitants of Vanuatu live below the poverty line. Moreover, the report highlights that the country is only on course to achieve two of the MDG goals, which are goal four (the reduction of child mortality) and goal six (the combatting of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases). AusAID identifies the main problems in achieving the goals are a lack of “access to employment, quality education or health services, and affordable transport or utilities” (2012, p. 1).

Walter Lini first highlighted these barriers at independence. In 2011, the top areas funded were education (AU$10.7 million, including $4.1 million on tertiary scholarships), infrastructure (AU$6.9 million) and health (AU$5.8 million). However, 20.1% of the budget, totalling AU$9.5 million, went to economic governance, in particular for the administration and accountability of the government and public services (AusAID, 2012).

Azmart Gani (2009) reports that political instability, mismanagement of funds, poor leadership, bribery and a lack of accountability, not only prevent economic growth within the Pacific, but also deter foreign aid and investors. As a result, over the past ten years GOs have built governance mandates into their foreign aid budgets for Pacific Island countries. These governance mandates seek to combat corruption, provide accountability and to strengthen weak institutions, and importantly, to protect the mismanagement of their funds. The year 2004 provides a fascinating example of such a need. In November of that year, Prime Minister Serge Vohor (in his third incarnation as PM) and his government reappointed officials who had been criminally charged with offences, and were unwilling to continue with the reformation of public institutions. Foreign funding for aid and development,
furthermore, was not reaching the people (Percy, 2004). The Australian Foreign Minister at the time, Alexander Downer, responded by threatening to cut off all aid (AUS$31 million), apart from the humanitarian programme, if the government did not change its actions. The government, nevertheless, did not respond immediately for it had a more pressing diplomatic issue with China and Taiwan: Vohor had ignored Vanuatu’s bilateral “One-China” policy and unilaterally approached Taiwan for aid funds, securing US$100 million in cash for the next five years. Vohor then played the two countries off against each other by pushing China for more assistance. The next week Vohor faced a vote of no confidence and was ousted after only four and a half months in the position. The new government, under Ham Lini, agreed to Downer’s demands and re-established Vanuatu’s diplomatic relationship with China. As a result, the Vanuatu and Australian governments later formed the Vanuatu-Australia Partnership for Development (2006-2015) and installed bilateral governance programmes, such as Governance for Growth. Although these endeavours seem wise, such governance programmes, and indeed aid and development in general, can also be a way for foreign governments with greater power to administer and monitor their own political interests. Walter Lini could foresee such occurrences happening, for in his independence speech he also said,

We are entitled to hope that we shall be able to exercise freedom of choice, in other words independence, in the way in which we provide public services and change our society as we develop. At the same time, we have to face the fact that there may be external pressures on us from both large companies and foreign governments, to conform to their ideas rather than our own when the two may differ. This itself will be a test of our determination and ability as well as a test of their generosity and spirit, and the result will, of
course, be the greater or a lesser degree of independence for Vanuatu. (1982, p. 29)

While Vanuatu, as shown in the example above, has at times failed the test of “determination and ability”, Australia, likewise, has failed the test of “generosity and spirit” on many occasions. Near the beginning of the previous chapter, reference was made to Pacific Island Countries long accusing Australia of “boomerang aid” and its self-interested endeavour for long-term political “stability”, particularly within Melanesian countries. In 2006, DFAT spokesman under the Howard Coalition government, Derek Rooken-Smith, admitted that over 80-90% of Australian aid dollars went to Australian firms (Banham, 2006; Hawksley, 2009). After winning the federal elections in 2007, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), under the leadership of Kevin Rudd, sought to remove the image of a pushy, bullying Australia within the Pacific. He launched the Port Moresby Declaration on the 6th of March 2008, claiming a “‘new era of cooperation’ with Pacific Island nations...[in which Australia] respects the independence of those nations” (Hawksley, 2009, p. 126). However, the “boat situation” was remedied by turning Nauru and Manus Island into client states for asylum seekers, as the Labor governments led by both Rudd and Julia Gillard began to adopt even more hardline policies than those of the conservative Liberal-National Coalition they had replaced. After the fall of Labor, the newly elected Coalition government in 2013, under Tony Abbott, integrated AusAID with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and turned its aid and development policies towards explicitly promoting the national interests of Australia (DFAT, 2014a, p. 1;

29 The same accusations could be made against the Abbott Coalition government. The United Nations Association of Australia reports, “In the 2013-2014 budget, a significant amount of the aid budget was diverted back to Australia to cover the on-shore costs associated with the asylum seeker programme. As a result, Australia is now the third largest recipient of its own aid” (2013).
More specifically, the government sharpened its focus on South East Asia and the Pacific, pulling away from aid funding and centring its attention on economic growth through the private sector as a means to increase stability and global growth (DFAT, 2014b, p. 2). In May 2014, the Australian government cut AU$6 billion from the AusAID programme, with a further AU$3 billion cut in the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Update in December of the same year (McDonald, 2014). These cuts were primarily taken from Africa and Latin America. Vanuatu did not suffer, with funding estimated at AU$60.1 million for 2013/4 and AU$60.4 million estimated for 2014/5 (DFAT, 2014c). Although, WSB did suffer. While the exact details surrounding the cuts are unknown, AusAID will no longer provide extra funding for WSB’s popular television series *Love Patrol* (ABC News, 2014; WSB, 2014). Under the new DFAT strategy, four tests will now guide the AusAID programmes. Two of these are crucial in regard to Vanuatu and the work of WSB: the first, aptly named, “Pursuing national interest and extending Australia’s influence” (DFAT, 2014a, p. 27), and the fourth: “Making Performance Count” (DFAT, 2014a, p. 28). In the fourth test, countries and their projects must deliver outcomes in a way that Australia deems appropriate, namely in terms of benchmarks and economic results. If a project meets their satisfaction, increased funding will occur, if not, they are given one year to improve or funding will be axed (DFAT, 2014a, p. 28).

To be fair, the DFAT report does provide a shade of nuance to the statements mentioned. Previous, and continuing, programmes, such as *Governance for Growth* have proven Australia and Vanuatu do, overall, work well together to create a better

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30 For example, in September of 2014, the Australian government made a “$40 million aid down payment” to Cambodia, in exchange for the opportunity for asylum seekers on detention in Nauru to resettle in Cambodia (ABC, 2014, September 27).
future for Vanuatu. The AusAID workers on the ground often do exceptional work at a local level (and have been strong advocates of the work of WSB). Concerns remain, however, regarding the new policies’ lack of recognition of the need to work within the cultural sensibilities of recipient countries. In the case of Vanuatu, the Australian pursuits of political stability through economic growth and innovation are underpinned by a belief that stability is found or generated by economic growth and prosperity. Conversely, for ni-Vanuatu, stability comes from their roots (using the tree and canoe metaphor) and it is the strength of those roots that enables them to paddle far and wide or, in other words, to innovate. Where one society tends to revolve around money and assets, the other establishes itself upon heritage and people. Miles also questions the sensibilities behind the Western economic push for growth, citing the self-sufficient nature of ni-Vanuatu and their general contentment to “just live”, “be”, or as they say in Bislama, “mi stap nomo”. He writes,

> No matter how prominently economic development figures as an issue in political speeches, there is little frustration among ni-Vanuatu about being impoverished or underdeveloped...little sense of the relative deprivation that incites other people in the Third World to change, revolution, or violence. (1998, p. 179)

In my fieldwork within Port Vila, however, I perceived a city gaining greater access each year to the rest of the world and noticing the wealth of others through television, mobile phones, pirated DVDs, the internet, not to mention through the (employed) expatriate way of living and tourism. Could this increasing exposure agitate the satisfaction of the *mi stap nomo* sensibility? Furthermore, the globalisation of technology is changing the priorities of families and development projects. As previously mentioned, I lived in homes with Wi-Fi but no hot water or
washing machines (although I will admit that, for research purposes, I too preferred having Wi-Fi than those other amenities). 75% of rural ni-Vanuatu own mobile phones, yet they do not have access to electricity and rely on diesel or kerosene. In 2011, AusAID began distributing solar lamps, which charge mobile phones and reduce mobile phone costs by 20-30% (AusAID, 2012, p. 7).

**Weighing in on Women**

The changes in development and the accompanying differences in sensibilities previously discussed highlight the importance of cultural understanding in bilateral partnerships and development projects. As Roden, Serrano and Giménez (2012) argue, the entire success and effectiveness of aid and development projects depend on cross-cultural understanding. Roden et al. advise aid and development workers to be aware of their own biases, to pre-learn as much as they can about the specific culture as possible, and to learn and adapt to the culture during projects on the ground. They give three cultural aspects to keep an eye on for both parties: systems of meaning, norms of behaviour and power relations.

These three cultural aspects remain imperative to development projects concerning social and human rights issues such as gender inequality and domestic violence. The empowering of women is a large global focus for the UN, Western GOs and human rights advocates. In 2012, AusAID began funding a ten-year initiative called “Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development” in 14 Pacific countries. The AU$320 million in funding is being used to increase the numbers of women in leadership and decision-making positions (since Vanuatu’s independence, only 1.4% of MPs have been women [DFAT, 2014c, p. 3]). The funding is also being used to increase economic opportunities, to reduce violence against women and to increase access to support
services and justice for survivors of violence (DFAT, 2014c). This section primarily considers gender violence in Vanuatu because of the incredibly high rates of violence against women both by husbands or intimate partners and non-partners in Vanuatu (some of which are amongst the highest in the world).

Both the Department of Women’s Affairs in Vanuatu and Forsyth claim that even though the law, kastom and religious leaders publicly declare gender equality in Vanuatu, in reality, equality is not practiced (Forsyth, 2009; Tor & Taka, 2004). In 2011, the Vanuatu Women’s Centre (VWC), the only official institution in the country for women to escape to if they are suffering from domestic violence, published an extensive report after surveying 3,619 women from all socio-economic backgrounds, both urban and rural, across Vanuatu. Of those surveyed, 68% had experienced emotional violence by their husband or intimate partner in their lifetime, and 60% had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their husband or intimate partner. Of this 60%, 90% of these experiences were severe, and for most, the events occurred frequently with multiple forms of violence (only 26% experienced physical abuse alone). 48% of women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a non-partner. Most often, this abuse was carried out by a boyfriend or male family member. However, in some instances, female family members and teachers also performed acts of physical violence. The report also found 15% of women had been beaten while pregnant (1 out of 10 were kicked in the stomach). Regarding childhood experiences, 30% of women surveyed had been physically or sexually assaulted under the age of 15, mainly by male family members and boyfriends. But, fathers were the top perpetrators of physical assault. Moreover, 28% of all women surveyed were forced into their first sexual encounter. This statistic is differentiated
from another 13% of women who did not want to have sex but it happened anyway (2011, pp. 16, 55, 95, 105, 181-2; see also AusAID, 2012, p. 10).

With graphic reports such as those exposed in the VWC report, Forsyth claims that leaders are not being entirely honest in proclaiming gender equality or have miscommunicated the value of equality thoroughly to their people. To some extent this may be true, but the complexities surrounding these issues extend wider and deeper than dishonesty or lack of good communication from leaders, and reach into all social, cultural and economic spheres. The VWC found that all forms of violence against women (and attitudes supporting it) occur in all of the islands, age groups, educational levels, socio-economic groups and religions of Vanuatu. The only group starting to diverge from this trend are women in higher education. Port Vila, on average, has lower percentages across all forms of gender violence. It is suggested that the strong presence of VWC and WSB are factors influencing the lower rate of domestic violence in Port Vila.

Problems also surround the legal and kastom forms of justice with regards to gender violence. In 2008, after ten years of activism, parliament passed the Family Protection Act 28. The act criminalised domestic violence, enabling the police to investigate incidents of domestic violence and the courts to issue protection orders. According to AusAID, in 2011, “Seventy per cent of offenders in correctional facilities...[were] there for violent, sexual offences” (2012, p. 10). However, within the law, the police are not required to follow up or prosecute all forms of domestic violence. Outside of Vila, officers have been known to side with the perpetrator and not take up the cause of the woman. Cases of domestic/sexual violence can also go
before the *kastom* courts, instead of through the law. Here again, the outcome for a woman entirely depends on the attitudes of the administrators of justice, in other words, the chiefs, who, in some cases, have been known to order the victim to pay compensation to the perpetrator/s. Moreover, as will be explained in the next section, women can be made to stay in abusive marriages or partnerships for the sake of community stability.

During a *Zero Balans* rehearsal I sat with a New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) volunteer. Triggered by the events in the play surrounding Lisa, we began to talk about the volunteer’s husband’s part-time work with the men’s prison in Vila. Confirming the large percentage of sexual offenders in prison nationwide, she said the majority of offenders in the Vila prison were there because of rape. The volunteer’s husband had found many of the inmates believed they had done nothing wrong. Similarly, the VWC survey discovered 60% of the women surveyed (both married/partnered and single) agreed to at least one of eleven justifications for a man to beat his wife or intimate partner. These attitudes and behaviours demonstrate several cultural values that support domestic violence. For instance, an extraordinary form of control by men, engrained inequality across both men and women, and a societal acceptance of violence as a form of punishment or means of conflict resolution. This later element is also found in other areas of society, such as the police force and within inter-island rivalries.

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31 The top four reasons: “He finds out she has been unfaithful” (38%), “She disobeys him” (34%), “Bride price has been paid” (32%) and “She needs to be disciplined, taught a lesson or educated” (28%). Women with secondary education agreed to a lesser extent and 11% of those who had received higher education agreed on a reason—most justified a beating if “she had been unfaithful” (VWC, 2011, pp. 80-81, 84).

32 Skewed interpretations of *kastom* and the *Blak Buk* (Bible) also contribute to these attitudes. The bride price (revoked in 2004 by the Malvatumauri) has had a positive impact for women in how their husband and in-laws treat them. Nonetheless, the common belief of the wife as “property” of the
In seeming contrast, to the above, the Department of Women’s Affairs report on *Gender, Custom and Domestic Violence* states that such aggressive forms of gender violence are not inherent of ni-Vanuatu and go against *kastom* values of conflict-resolution, which revolve around consensus rather than confrontation. The report informs that historically, women have always been leaders, decision makers, greatly respected and in many circumstances shared the same roles with men (Toka & Tor, 2004; Forsyth, 2009). Anthropologist Margaret Jolly also agrees, arguing that “[w]arfare and violence were endemic in the pre-colonial past but were always opposed by the countervailing values of peace and consensus (which no doubt appeared less salient to European witnesses)” (1996, p. 178). Toka and Tor pinpoint the beginning of gender inequality in Vanuatu to the arrival of traders and missionaries, which changed the social structure of villages. Men left (or were forced to leave) to work on plantations leaving all the village duties to the women, and the missionaries impressed a far more conservative role upon them (2004, pp. 15-18).

Other suggestions for how gender violence and control has become so acceptable in Vanuatu include the diminishing of graded systems and battles, the introduction of the cash economy, migration to Vila and Luganville – which gives less security – and women gaining greater independence outside of the kinship group. Yet, some of these suggestions seem contradictory to the low statistics from the VWC concerning highly educated women and its discovery that higher rates of violence occur in rural areas. These apparent contradictions indicate how complex the issues of gender inequality and domestic violence are within the country.

**husband after the bride price** (the limit being 80,000 vatu, around AU$920) has been fully paid, can also entitle a man to treat his wife how he wants. In addition, references to Adam and Eve (i.e. Adam came before Eve and Eve first ate the fruit from the serpent), and the quoting of Ephesians 5:22-24 are justifications used to validate men’s authority over women.
My point here is not to paint a picture of Vanuatu as a “basket case” for violence against women (and it is worth acknowledging how much serious work remains to be done in a country like Australia before talk of gender equality can be accepted as more than an aspirational statement). During my time in Vanuatu, I did not personally witness anything untoward. The father of the family I lived with was extremely loving and supportive of his wife, encouraging her with her small businesses and looking after the family while she travelled to New Caledonia for work. In fact, the father not only took great pride in his wife, but also his elder daughter (the younger one was in primary school) by managing her singing career. This was also the case for the other men in their church community. However, I did witness interesting attitudes in a Love Patrol workshop for Port Vila teachers in 2010. The scriptwriter of Zero Balans took the workshop and asked the teachers to divide into two groups, women on one side and men on the other (I joined in with the women). She asked each group what a wife should let her husband do, and what a husband should let his wife do, and gave them a list of behaviours to choose from. The two groups talked and then came together to discuss their answers. All agreed a husband should not let his wife work in a bar, drink or smoke. All agreed that a wife could work in an office, store or school. The female teachers added that a wife should be allowed to work in politics and construction, have a small business, be in charge of family finances, to study and learn to drive. Yet, only half of the women thought they should travel overseas. In contrast, the responses from some (not all) of the educated men made me very angry. The male teachers believed wives do not have the right to talk to any man or woman they want to, to visit their families whenever they want, to give money to their families, to get a check-up for HIV/AIDS or STIs, or to use family planning methods. The scriptwriter then asked if they thought a wife
should let her husband do those things. They replied yes. I was so angry that I did not hear the scriptwriter's response (not the most productive stance for an ethnographic researcher, I admit, but a reminder of how perplexing the experience of fieldwork can be).

When addressing gender inequality within ni-Vanuatu communities, Jolly (1996) asserts that the over-use of individualistic, human rights-focused language and the condemning of men can prevent any positive effect occurring. While human rights language has helped ni-Vanuatu women tremendously in advancing their cause, the language does not specifically address *kastom* values and connects more with highly educated ni-Vanuatu women. Jolly notes that the disquiet of some women towards these issues also “perhaps emanates from a political process whereby having powerful foreigners [i.e. international aid & development workers] is alienating the very local men they are trying to influence and change” (1996, p. 181). Coordinator of the VWC, Merilyn Tahi, has long advocated a collective digging up of the cultural roots of violence. Tahi suggests men and women together plant new seeds of cultural non-violence and equality (Jolly, 1996, pp. 182-183). The VWC report, in addition, calls for awareness to now be transferred into implementation. It further advises, among other things, for VWC programmes to be executed more widely in the islands and to work extensively with leaders whom the community trusts. Moreover, the VWC report advocates strengthening the legal and policy frameworks surrounding domestic violence. These frameworks include creating a Social Welfare Department, developing more comprehensive legislation that increases protection for women and children, raising the minimum age of marriage for women from 16 to 18, and making it compulsory for police to follow up and prosecute every domestic violence incident.
As we will see the themes of gender violence and inequality are starkly represented in the play *Zero Balans*, but in a Freirean problem-posing kind of way that leaves open questions, and does not impose top-down solutions to the issues or employ Western human rights discourse.

**Redressing Conflict; Chiefs and the *Kastom* System of Conflict-Management**

As indicated earlier by Toka and Tor, the peaceful *kastom* system of conflict-management contrasts with the topic most recently discussed. While there are many variations and levels to the *kastom* systems, Forsyth writes that several common threads unite them, namely “the emphasis on peace and harmony in the community, on restoring relationships, on the use of chiefs to facilitate agreement, on community involvement in the processes and on the achievement of settlement by the payment of compensation” (2009, pp. 95-96).

The central idea to most *kastom* systems is that the chief (or chiefs) of a community are responsible for handling conflict both within the group and with other individuals or groups from other communities. This process normally begins with one of the parties, or one of their family members, talking to the chief or his representative. More recently, the chief sometimes requires money to commence the conflict-resolution process. The chief then holds a public meeting with the two parties involved and their families. The community often attends, including members of neighbouring villages. In urban areas, other connections to the parties will be invited, such as employers or colleagues. The conflict is resolved by “talking it out”; where the chief gives each party and interested member the chance to fully
express their views. Arguments are often presented in the form of parables (Forsyth, 2009). In an interview with Forsyth, anthropologist Carlos Mondragon gives his interpretation of this process,

I believe these legal processes are more intended to give space for each party to present their view so they don’t feel aggrieved. Public speech is so important in Vanuatu, even if the content is absurd or repetitive. It is important the people feel they have had their say. If there is a notion of justice in this it is in the opportunity to externalise your grievance. (2009, p. 101)

Within this *serem toktok* (sharing talking), 58% of women speak for themselves (Forsyth, 2009). If they are not allowed to speak (as is the case in some *kastom* systems) or do not want to speak, someone will always represent them and their interests. The practice of speaking on behalf of someone is a normal occurrence, which may also occur for youth and sometimes adult men. Once the chief (or chiefs) reach a decision, they give an order for one or both parties to make a payment of some sort. Forsyth notes that these payments usually involve cash, but also “pigs, pig tusks, mats, kava, and root crops are...used, especially in rural areas” (2009, p. 103). The chief will often give some sort of accompanying warning, instruction or prohibition.

Because the heart of these conflict-management systems is for restoration of the community, a chief will consider the good of his community as a whole over that of the individual’s, and the community’s peace and harmony over justice for an individual. Chiefs, overall, do recognise individual human rights. Nevertheless, if the whole community were to suffer as a consequence of upholding an individual’s
rights, then the chief would put the whole community first. As noted above in relation to the handling of domestic violence cases, there are some important critiques to be made of these traditional conflict-management systems, particularly as the country modernises, however no one is calling for these systems of conflict-management to be abolished.

**The Blank Page: Youth in Vanuatu**

One of the key difficulties to which chiefs need to adapt with their conflict-management systems, is the modernisation and education of youth in their villages and settlements. The number one issue for the chiefs, and indeed the whole country, nonetheless, is generating solutions to bridge the gap between leaving school and entering the work force, particularly since 58% of the population of Vanuatu are 24 years and under (VNSO, 2009, p. 8). This problem encompasses teenagers whose parents cannot afford to keep them in high school and for youth who have finished high school. There has never been so many educated ni-Vanuatu ready for employment with so few jobs available. Youth in Port Vila are caught in between two worlds. They cannot rely on subsistence farming and fishing to create work and provide for them, but neither is the globalising town providing for them at present. This becomes more difficult when materialism and consumption is far more on display in Vila than in rural and remote areas of Vanuatu. Teenagers from the ages of fifteen also leave the outer islands, with hardly anything to work towards, in search of work in Vila. This group of youth further adds to the growing unemployed population (N. Hamilton, personal communication, August 24, 2013). In her work with the Blacksands settlement, with whom WSB work closely, anthropologist Jean Mitchell came across a phrase youth use to describe their situation: *waet pej* (white
page) – a blank, white page ready to be filled, but with no work and activities to fill it with (2011, p. 39). Small groups of young men roam the city each day. Their boredom and poverty can contribute to hopelessness, apathy, crime, alcoholism and spurts of violence. Miles further reports that youth unemployment has contributed to “a breakdown in chiefly authority” (1998, p. 78). As well as facing the problem of unemployment, youth are disappointed by the corruption amongst politicians and the general lack of interest in youth affairs by them and their community chiefs. Yet, amongst the Port Vila community, many spoke highly of Regenavanu, who was the Youth Minister during the first half of the rehearsals of Zero Balans. They described Regenavanu as the only “good” politician, and as one, who cares about young people. Regenavanu was the guest of honour at a WSB fundraiser to get a Yut Senta band to Kenya to perform at an anti-corruption conference. In addition to Regenavanu, WSB is working with chiefs across Efate to assist in these areas. Support for youth is important, as Mitchell notes, while youth “are considered…easily exploitable resources...they are also essential to the survival of the nation and deserving of care” (2011, p. 26).

33 Regenavanu advocated for the outer islands to be developed with industries such as horticulture, so that youth did not have to migrate to Vila to look for work. Anthropologist Bolton argues, “[l]evel marketing” she told me, stemming from Malaysia.

34 I talked to expatriates in their twenties and thirties who, were working or volunteering in different sectors of Port Vila. This group thought that ni-Vanuatu seemed not to be entrepreneurs because most ni-Vanuatu work for Western or Asian businesses. At the same time, the family I lived with and their church community were strong entrepreneurs, running their own small businesses. The family ran a childcare centre in their home and had a recording studio. The father also organised boxing and music events, managed musicians, including his daughter, who was an international singer. The mother had worked her way up several pyramid schemes, "multi-level marketing" she told me,
The Arts and Nation Building

Port Vila is a colourful city filled with music. Young people hang around in small groups playing songs on their mobile phones. Some communities, like Pango, play gospel and Pacific-style music over the village sound system. Harmonious vocals and an upbeat tempo drive Vanuatu music, particularly the popular string bands, which usually consist of guitars, ukuleles, a string box, bongo drums and sometimes a tambourine. They perform at fundraisers, events, resorts, at the international airport, and on Pacific music videos. Church forms an integral part of ni-Vanuatu life in which the music played ranges from traditional hymns to contemporary gospel, arranged with keyboards and vocals, heavily amplified with microphones. Radios at the service stations and in the buses repeatedly broadcast the latest pop songs from the West; Pacific reggae dominates and great excitement surrounds the big music festivals such as Fest’ Napuan. The family I lived with had four children ranging from seven through to twenty-three; all were heavily involved with music at their church, with the older ones constantly accessing music videos on You Tube. Alongside the mobile phones blaring American hip-hop, reggae, gospel music at church and the string bands in fundraisers, kastom practices remain alive in Port Vila. Kastom dances and songs are performed for tourists, as well as in local, and national festivals such as the Fest’ Nalenga and in pan-Pacific arts festivals such as the Festival of Pacific Arts and the Melanesian Festival of Arts and Culture. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) in the centre of town documents traditional kastom rituals and cultural activities from around the country for preservation and

35 A wooden box with a string that comes out on the diagonal and is plucked.
36 Fest’ Napuan is a weeklong, annual music festival in Port Vila that takes place in the month of October. It is free to the public and involves local and international artists from the Pacific.
promotion. The documentation further helps ni-Vanuatu realise the value of their own particular culture and learn about the other indigenous cultures in the archipelago. On Saturday mornings, the VCC teaches children traditional songs, sand drawing, stories, mat weaving and how to play traditional percussion instruments. The arts have always been an intrinsic part of ni-Vanuatu life. Before colonisation, *kastom* dance, music, stories, gestures, body paint, masks, carvings, sand drawing, mat weaving and other artistic and performative elements played important, multi-layered roles in village life. These forms of *kastom* connected people to place, lineages and the spiritual world. The role of song could be practical, to call the wind for travel or to keep an even tempo while building a canoe. Alternatively, the purpose could be social such as for play and in welcoming guests, or to access spirits of the ancestors and as part of initiations, secret societies and graded systems. Performance and artistic activities were also often aesthetically and thematically linked and performed together, functioning as markers of a village’s identity. Trade, marriages and matrilineal connections between villages produced opportunities to borrow and adapt elements. Huffman points out that “the ebb and flow of relationships with neighbouring cultures and islands formed part of an intricate process which has continued, in a modified form, to the present day” (1996, p. 182). Indeed, this sensibility has provided the opportunity for the current inhabitants of Vanuatu to use the arts as a form of negotiation between traditional and contemporary *kastom*, British and French heritages, and the wave of globalisation reaching their shores. Here we see the tree and the canoe metaphor reappearing again, as Kaufmann observes,

The basic attraction of [ni-Vanuatu] art lies in the tension between, on one hand, innovative elements – creations that feed change – and, on the other
hand, those elements deeply rooted in tradition and respect for the work accomplished by the ancestors – factors promoting stability. (1996, pp. 17-18)

In a discussion paper titled *The Art of Development*, PIPP (2012) advises governments and development organisations to prioritise the arts, culture and creative enterprise in Vanuatu. They recognise that the developing and maintaining of customary and contemporary arts and culture is vital for the health and building of the nation as it navigates its way through the 21st century. Vanuatu is thus fortunate to have seen the development of WSB and its theatre company. Where and what is this “theatre” and how did the theatre company develop into the Company we see today that plays an important role in nation building?

**Conclusion**

In spite of almost being wiped off the face of the earth...the people of Vanuatu have bounced back with vigor and do not bear a grudge against the outside world. They are a very special people, and the country is the way the world should be: a myriad of interconnecting indigenous languages and cultures with intense respect for the material, physical, and spiritual world. The history of European contact nearly destroyed Vanuatu cultures and,...newer, outside influences may yet try to do so. Yet, one has faith in the deep, philosophical wisdom of the Vanuatu people to choose what is really best for them and to reject those modern influences that they deem harmful for future generations. (Huffman, 1998, p. xi)

This chapter has considered some of the challenges that ni-Vanuatu have had to contend with, both in the past and in the present. These challenges include, but are
not limited to, negotiating with and assimilating the systems of governance, economics and religion of foreign powers and agencies, and their modes of culture and meaning making.

Huffman writes above of his hope for the future of Vanuatu. The recurring metaphor of the tree and the canoe offers an insight into one way ni-Vanuatu have been able to navigate their way through a changing world, and how they will do so in the future. WSB are an important part of this present and future navigation. Over its 25 plus years, the local NGO has become embedded within the ni-Vanuatu community and, as we will further see in Chapter Four, is able to negotiate different worlds well.

Finally, this chapter aimed to give knowledge on Vanuatu so that the reader may understand not only the context within WSB works and the issues explored within Zero Balans, but also how ni-Vanuatu might approach, create and participate in plays such as Zero Balans. Thus laying the groundwork for the ethnographic observations and analysis to be detailed in the following two chapters.
Chapter 4: The Play is Not the Only Thing: Modes of Participation in Zero Balans

Introduction

Participation is, by any account, a core ingredient of Theatre for Development (TfD) work. Sheila Preston, for instance, writes that practitioners now view it as plain “common sense” when designing projects (2009, p. 127). At first glance, the logic of this position seems irrefutable. Surely, if a community is able to participate actively in the creation of a performance, this is more likely to support key development goals within, and around, the performance event. It should offer some safeguards (though not, of course, an iron-clad guarantee) against the possibility that outsiders or high-placed officials in various government agencies or NGOs might exercise undue influence on the project, subverting its mode of community engagement and imposing a top-down agenda, primarily for the benefit of authorities and with little understanding of the local situation (Ahmed, 2002; Kidd & Kumar, 1981). Active community participation should give room for the community to discuss their problems with facilitators, to work out solutions for themselves. Ideally, participation enables TfD practitioners to pragmatically balance the interests of all parties involved and, in the long run, increases a community's capacity to self-mobilise without the need for constant outside help.

However, while TfD scholars do sometimes acknowledge that “[t]heatre can be participatory in numerous ways” (Sloman 2009, p. 46), it must be said that certain preferred modes of participation have come to dominate in debates about best practice. Overwhelmingly, the preference is for process-oriented plays and
workshops, largely inspired by theatre-in-education methods such as those developed by Heathcote and Bolton in the UK during the 1970s or based upon the work of Augusto Boal (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Landy & Montgomerie, 2012; Thompson, 2003). The default assumption is that a more-or-less conventional, pre-scribed, full-length, narrative play, such as *Zero Balans*, does not foster a sufficiently critical, active engagement of the community. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter Two, Boal (like Brecht before him) famously identified such “Aristotelian” dramaturgies as legitimating an inherently conservative politics (Boal, 1979) and contemporary TfD practitioners like Sloman (2012) have continued to criticise “conventional” forms of theatre for their apparently one-way, top-down transmission of development themes. Such conventional dramaturgies, it is argued, involve the community less in the creation of the piece and make it easier for authorities to manipulate and pacify them.

There are certainly case studies in the literature on TfD that do lend support to the critiques offered by Boal, Sloman and others (Johansson 2011, Colletta & Kidd, 1980; Etherton & Cow, 1980). However, notwithstanding these examples, this chapter will draw closely on my participant-observation of WSB’s rehearsals and performances of *Zero Balans* to argue that its more or less conventional dramaturgy was no barrier to deep, meaningful community engagement. During rehearsals, the actors (all of whom are thoroughly integrated members of the Port Vila community) laboured over the play, working in a rehearsal space that was open to the rest of the WSB “family” and the urban and peri-urban communities with which WSB is so enmeshed. During performances, the audiences were loud and interactive, speaking back to the actors and literally dictating sections of the performances. How was this
situation different to more canonical TfD methodologies? In brief, it could be said that WSB has eschewed the “formalist fallacy”—namely, the idea that if you apply the right dramaturgical formula, certain empowering forms of community participation will necessarily follow—that features in so much of the writing on TfD. Rather, WSB has grounded its work in the nurturing of grassroots community relationships that make community participation possible across a wide range of dramaturgical forms in theatre and other media. They understand, as Majid Rahnema argues, that,

Participation, which is also a form of intervention, is too serious and ambivalent a matter to be taken lightly, or reduced to an amoeba word lacking in any precise meaning, or a slogan, or fetish or, for that matter, only an instrument or a methodology....To understand the many dimensions of participation, one needs to enquire seriously into all its roots and ramifications, these going deep into the heart of human relationships. (2009, p. 144)

This chapter takes up the challenge posed by Rahnema. It seeks to understand how the theatre company, its audiences, and the WSB and Port Vila communities in general, participate and communicate with each other in the creating, rehearsing and performing of Zero Balans. More specifically, it seeks to understand the “roots and ramifications" of such participation and the kinds of relationships that are being built in and around these processes. The chapter divides into three aspects of participation within Zero Balans: the participation occurring during the performance, the participation occurring in the creation and rehearsal process, and the company's participation with the rest of the WSB and Port Vila communities.
The Zero Balans Audiences

Four sets of spectators watched Zero Balans: the general public in evening performances; high school and teachers college students on weekday afternoons; family and WSB workers for a dress rehearsal, and a guest night with dignitaries. Apart from the guest night, which will be referred to later, the rest of the audiences actively displayed a way of watching theatre, which was visibly and affectively far from passive, and in this chapter I will predominantly refer to these audiences. To begin with, the general public performances comprised a mix of nuclear and extended families and groups of young adults, with a few expatriate residents, tourists and volunteers attending at times. They bustled into the theatre in a hive of activity, relinquishing any personal space and requiring the chairs to be pushed forward on Saturdays so, in the words of Walker, “another set of people can perch on the edge of the rostrum behind” (2011, May 17, para. 1). He further comments, “You begin to feel like a cattle herder at the market. But everyone is remarkably tolerant” (2011, May 17, para. 1). Within the crowded audience, it was not unusual to see a baby being passed from one woman to another, a little one crying, mothers taking a baby or toddler outside during a performance or children playing behind the black curtains to the side of the audience rostrum. At the front, children sat jumbled on grass mats, woven with dyed purple or pink strands, their sandals neatly lined up at the edges and their big eyes staring up at the bright lights and actors on stage.

WSB embraces the seemingly boundless energy of its audiences but is also somewhat wary of it, lest it draw too much focus from key ideas in the mise en scène. Indeed, prior to every performance, the company plays a voiceover recording which advises audience members not to use mobile phones, take photos, chew gum or talk;
to look after their children, respect the hard work of the actors, listen, follow the play and enjoy. The intent here is not so much to pacify or control the audience, nor even to instil respect for a theatre etiquette that fails often enough in western theatres as well (particularly in regard to mobile phone use). Rather, it is as if the company is aiming to broker a short-term deal, asking the audience for a few moments of relative calm, just enough to set the scene and get the inciting incident of the plot out of the way. In any case, the effects of this pre-show recording never lasted long. The villagers of *Lagun Saed* opened the performance with a harmonious hymn surrounded by blue light and billowing smoke. As they exited, Lisa and *Abu* walked onto the dark stage with torches and comments filtered through the crowd. As the last sounds of “Amen” rang throughout the building from backstage, Willie and Steven walked on stage and put up posters reading “Lisa *Solmit*” (*Lisa* is a prostitute) on the bamboo walls. Without fail, laughter and loud comments erupted straight away from the audience. Within minutes the audience members had already renegotiated the terms in which they were going to watch the performance.

Such watching of *Zero Balans* by the audiences regularly encompassed what Thompson describes as “emotional, often automatic, embodied responses” (2009, p. 119) to the activity on stage. The audience then shared these responses with each other, fostering a kind of community unto themselves. Pods of young men often laughed, commenting loudly to each other about scenes and talking back to the actors. Some yelled “old man!” to *Abu*, or called out “*mane, mane, mane*” (money) when Ezekiel tries to withdraw cash from the ATM. In one memorable moment, when a young female character called her *jif* (chief) “*sathead*” (stupid), a young man repeated it out loud. In a society that honours and has deep respect for its leaders,
this young man may have never been able to get away with calling his own jif stupid, suggesting that the play created an environment where people felt free to challenge prevailing social codes. While the calling of a jif “stupid” is disrespectful for a young person in Vanuatu, it is not necessarily uncalled for. As the previous chapter identified, a large number of disenfranchised youth are starting to lose respect for their jifs because they feel they are not doing enough to help their “waet pej” (white, blank page) situation (Mitchell, 2011, p. 39). At the same time, some jifs are experiencing difficulty in dealing with young ni-Vanuatu, because such jifs are far less knowledgeable or educated in contemporary Western ways than the youth in their community are.

The enthusiastic, real participation of these young men elicited equally enthusiastic and vocal responses from other audience members. The women accordingly “shushed” the young men when they got too rowdy; however, they would also comment out loud too, especially in scenarios involving relationships, alcohol and cigarettes. If a woman sat beside me, she would turn to me and say things like, “such a good actor, he’s so funny” in regards to one of the actors who plays Ezekiel, or “oooh, I don’t approve” when Lisa smokes. One night in particular, a chorus of women created a stir by shouting “adultery!” when Lisa and Ezekiel first dance together in the rain and Willie (her boyfriend at the time) calls her with what might best be described as a “signalling whistle”.37 Dialogue and debate is already happening among the audience even as the show unfolds, not as a carefully curated

37 A “signalling whistle” involves tightly pursed lips and a kind of half whistling/half sucking sound. In Bislama it is called a wesil, the same term used for any kind of whistle, though in local languages there is a distinction and quite a different term is used for this type, which has a specific use. It is used to signal one’s presence to a person at a distance and occurs right throughout Vanuatu. In this case, Willie makes the sound to gain the attention of Lisa. When she turns to see him playing the guitar at the back of the stage, he raises his chin at an angel and his eyebrows to indicate for her to stop dancing with Ezekiel and come be with him.
post-performance discussion, mediated by a benevolent, Boalian joker. Yet, this is not to say that the performance makers are not also working to elicit and shape these audience responses. The scriptwriter places words like “sathead” in the text precisely because she knows it is liable to get a reaction. This is the same with any verbal or physical affection. Ni-Vanuatu, as a whole, hold a conservative view towards relationships and public displays of affection between couples do not normally occur (on Saturday nights, for example, young couples walk around town with a half-metre gap between them). This meant that every slight acknowledgement of a relationship between characters—a smile, a look across the stage—was always noticed and produced responses of “oohs” and “aahs” (or sometimes “ews” and “ughs”). Hand holding, the touching of shoulders and kisses on the cheek produced even louder responses. It also meant that the company only portrayed scenes of sexual violence in a symbolic way, knowing that the audience would understand what the company were portraying. When Willie and the Lagun Saed men sexually assault Lisa, for instance, the men formed a circle around her and she crouched down with her arms around her body to protect herself. In response, cries of “shit”, “oh my god” and “huh?!” were heard throughout the audience, before a silence took over. Significantly, many of these vocalisations from the audience members to the actions on stage were accompanied by particular, culturally-specific modes of embodiment; women often displayed their dislike of Ezekiel giving Lisa champagne by clucking their tongues, shaking their heads and then commenting to each other.

Audiences also responded strongly to fights. They squealed, laughed (and the women shushed) when the Lagun Saed men attacked Ezekiel. They whistled and
hurled insults, for instance calling Lisa a “harlot” when she fights with Ezekiel’s wife Rita, or trying to stop the fight by yelling, “hey, hey!” Likewise, they joined in with the big, communal scenes: clapping and cheering after the Jif’s speech and prayer during Ezekiel’s campaign (with some audience members even saying Amen); more clapping, cries of “wahoo” and “hurry up” following the arrival of the kava; and again, clapping and cheering (particularly from the women) when the Lagun Saed boys would parody a kastom dance.

Laughter pervaded the play. It erupted at one-liners and in scenes with comic timing, such as the scene where the politicians meet over land management. In this meeting, the Prime Minister rages at the other politicians for constantly using their mobile phones only to be interrupted by the ringing of his own mobile which he answers amid raucous cries of “double face!” from the other politician characters, as well as some audience members. Laughter also burst forth in response to the larger-than-life physical style, vocal exaggeration and slapstick humour in some scenes. Ezekiel’s sister, Elice, for instance, holds his office phone upside down as she desperately tries to prove she can be his secretary. In another sequence, Ezekiel runs around the stage and backstage yelling for his children only to find out from Rita that they are in Santo. He falls on his knees before Rita, gripping her hands and pleading for her to say he is wan gud fella man. Rita drags him round the stage, trying to get away from him, until Ezekiel spots two distant family members whom he hopes might be better disposed towards him than his estranged wife. He jumps up and chases them off the stage in a desperate effort to get a confession out of them instead.
The meaning of the audience's laughter is not always so obvious. As well as the good humour that accompanied such playful on stage antics as those cited above, audience members sometimes giggled in serious scenes, including as Ezekiel and Elice wail loudly at the funeral of *Abu* or as Willie sings of his fraught relationship with Lisa. In addition, they laughed when anything went wrong on stage, like when an angel could not transition the hospital bed properly from a horizontal to diagonal position and lock it in properly. I found this particular kind of “nervous” laughter happened outside of the performance space as well; when anyone felt slightly embarrassed, uncomfortable or shy concerning the situation they were in, they giggled or softly laughed as a way to make themselves feel more comfortable. Gaskell and Taylor write that in their small touring plays, WSB use comedy as a way to defuse the sensitivity surrounding topics which are not normally discussed in public and to “transport” the audience into a comfortable place where they can dialogue on these issues (2007, p. 19). In an interview with Taylor, one WSB actor explains:

[Robin] Why, what’s special about the drama that make’s [sic] it work – that allows people to talk about tapu [taboo] topics?

[WSBM4] Because I think, it’s a tapu for them but if you play it in a way that you make joke of it, you like sort of make fun in the play like if I’m a sperm, I just like run in and say “Yeah, I’m a sperm! And you know – or semen “Yeah I’m a semen! And I’m there, I’m the one who is going to transport you. Right let’s go!” (2007, p. 19)

While in this case Taylor and the actor are speaking about sexual health education and the small plays, a similar approach takes place in *Zero Balans*. Amongst other things, WSB “make fun” of and play with the politicians, the *Jif*, the *Wantok* system
and some of the relationships through the play. Nevertheless, there is more to this approach then tapping into a certain ni-Vanuatu sensibility in order for an audience to open up on sensitive or tapu (taboo) issues within the performance. WSB employ entertainment in Zero Balans as a way to break social codes and mount direct critiques of political big men (and other issues, such as gender violence), which may not be acceptable outside of the theatre, whilst enabling the Port Vila community to take an active (and enjoyable) part in it.

At half-time the crowd spilled out into the dark night, bee-lining their way to the cake stalls in the adjacent building or over the road to the convenience store for chips and sweets. At the cake stalls, large and small bodies swarmed around tables filled with square slices of cake and displaying handwritten signs of 50vt for carrot and 30vt for other. Fathers and mothers snuck their arms between waists or over shoulders to reach the slices. They grabbed them in handfuls, called to the stall holders, threw their coins over and stretched out their arms to receive change. Outside, everyone congregated in large groups to eat and talk on the gravel driveway; one or two WSB volunteers carried free juice round in plastic cups on a tray; and the actors come out and mixed in with the audience. The audience then took their treats back into the theatre for the second half and through the next forty-five minutes scrunches of metal foil and pops of gum filtered through the performance. One night, a brother and sister fought over a packet of chips, accusing each other of eating too much. Another night, a child around the age of three spent the whole time pinching her slice of cake with her fingers and thumb, putting it in her mouth and staring at the audience, the stage and then her cake.
The daytime audiences of high-school students were just as interactive. Girls responded to any physical or verbal affection with hands-over-mouts, squeals, oohs and aahs. Both genders giggled, or exclaimed, “oh my gosh, no!” as Willie hung signs around Lagun Saed declaring Lisa to be a solmit (prostitute) or when Rita discovers Ezekiel spent time with two ladies in Thailand instead of attending a conference. One afternoon, a group of boys in the separate side seating area were so chuffed that they had the place to themselves that they declared to the rest of the students, “VIP! This is the VIP area.” As the smoke machines billowed they said to each other, “you smoke man?” and cracked jokes about marijuana. In another performance, the students, as a whole, were consistently loud with a just few reminding everyone to be quiet. This created a pattern of laughter and talking followed immediately by shushing and for two hours I heard: “hahaha”, “shhh”, “hahahahahaha”, “shhhhhhh”. In my end of week reflections I wrote, “I don’t think I heard any of the play” (Fieldnotes, May 8, 2011).

These behaviours all stand in stark contrast to notions of a passive audience; yet, such lively descriptions only scratch the surface of refuting them as passive. Brian Cow and Michael Etherton, in their observations of African well-made plays, sound a note of warning, in this regard, arguing that a “rowdy and appreciative” audience can just indicate a consumerist response to the work rather than a response of genuine intellectual reflexivity (1980, p. 575). Therefore, in the following sections, this chapter will examine the forms of dialogue and interaction occurring through the “rowdy and appreciative” of Zero Balans performances and how this predisposed the audiences for action, inquiry and influence.
The Influence of the Audience on the Actors

The audience had a huge influence on the performance of the actors on stage. Their enthusiastic reactions spurred the actors to a greater height of play and improvisation than witnessed in the full run-throughs during rehearsals. The audience and actors often bounced off each other, increasing the level of frivolity between them. In particular, the audience affected the personality of Titus, one of the two actors who played Ezekiel. In performances, he became progressively more cheeky and comical, improvising actions never rehearsed before. In one scene, the character Ezekiel dresses in front of the mirror for his first day in parliament. The mirror is imaginary, and Titus stood front stage left, making the section of audience in front of him the mirror. He then played up to the audience by laughing at the mirror, staring at the mirror, turning his butt towards the mirror, checking it out and wiggling it about in the mirror. The audiences exploded into laughter during this piece, cheering him on to take it further and, in this manner, could extend the play by another five minutes. One night, Titus bowed to the audience after this episode; spectators cheered and clapped him in response for the interaction. Another night, after he danced with Lisa in the rain, Titus jumped onto his office desk and sung loudly, “Rain Yu Staep, Rain Yu Staep, Rain Yu Staep, Rain Yu Staep,” while dancing round in circles and spanking the air with his right hand. Smiles full of teeth, forward-leaning bodies, claps, squeals, laughter and joy permeated the room in those times. The minor characters began to automatically feed off this enthusiasm of the crowd and play up, at times directing the attention of the audience off the main narrative onto the outskirts of the stage.
Again, the enthusiasm of the audience, while embraced, is sometimes a double-edged sword for the performers. After the family night, Peter Walker, the director, sensed that some of the playful improvisations were taking too much focus away from the story. The next day, he advised the actors, “Don’t make it over the top. It’s not normal and ends the scene. Don’t make anything that is slightly funny” (Fieldnotes, May 5, 2011). The audience influence, nonetheless, was stronger than his directions. On Saturday the 28th of May, Walker again commented on the “major battle...to keep the laughter down” (2011, May 28, para. 2), holding further meetings to address the over-the-top nature of the audiences and actors. He wrote, “As mentioned it got better briefly after my set of notes but in the last 2 shows it set in again. Various unnecessary ad libs and too much ‘acting’ in crowd scenes.” However, he also readily acknowledged that “[i]t’s a fine line as some of the scenes are pure comedy” (2011, May 28, para. 2). Such notes were not so much an attempt to assert directorial authority as they were a reminder of the actors’ responsibility to channel the audience’s excitement, to give their energised responses shape and meaning in relation to the bigger ideas of the play. However, no amount of care could quell the noisy audience interventions in those occasional moments when something clearly wrong happened on stage. At the end of Zero Balans, the Lagun Saed villagers pack up their belongings on stage, leave the village and exit through the audience. The actors take props used through the play, including large metal kettles. In one performance, one particular kettle had not been emptied and Ronald lifted it over his back and walked toward the exit unaware that water had begun to lightly spill on the floor behind him. A grandmother sitting beside me stood up, pointed at the dripping kettle and yelled to the actor about the water. Several other women joined in. Once the actor realised the women were shouting at him, he looked down between his
legs and the water shot out of the kettle with great force. More people began to yell and he immediately took the kettle off his back, carried it to the exit, fetched a cloth and gave the water a quick wipe. Instead of the scene revolving around the tragedy of the government kicking the community off the land, the audience was focused on the dripping kettle!

While the actors could stimulate laughter and noise from the audience and in return be influenced by them, they could also completely still them. As the villagers hear the radio report that the Prime Minister has fired Ezekiel, they and their jif stop sucking up to Ezekiel and turn on him. The younger men beat Ezekiel up and the play exposes on another level the role the voters play in corruption by using the big men for their own interests. As mentioned earlier, the audience often squealed and laughed during Ezekiel’s beating, but then would fall immediately into silence. Walker talks particularly of this moment as a perfect example of when the actors “held the audience and wiped the smiles off their faces” (2011, May 28, para. 2).

**The Shaping and Re-Shaping of Production Details**

The ability for the company and the audiences to shape and re-shape each other was found not just through the acting in the live performances; it was also most keenly observed in the frequent changing of the starting time, the changing of production details and the acting, directing and scriptwriting processes within rehearsals.

Although there were clearly advertised, set times for each performance, audiences frequently turned up to watch the play far in advance of the scheduled start, sometimes catching the company off-guard and often resulting in the company bringing the starting time forward. For the first school performance, the students
arrived while the company were still involved in a serious meeting on the seating rostra, surrounded by their belongings and bags. They were not expecting the schools for at least another forty-five minutes, and as the first group of students entered the theatre, the team broke up their meeting, gathered their belongings and hurriedly got ready with no time for warm ups. While the students filed into their seats, one cleaner quickly mopped the stage floor, joined soon by another. The floor dried within minutes and the play started as soon as the company finished changing and setting up. Likewise, the evening performances were scheduled to start at 7pm but early arrivals repeatedly brought this start time forward. On Opening Night, the community filled the theatre by 6.05pm and by 6.30pm the seating was at well over capacity and the play simply had to begin. On Saturdays, many were turned away. Volunteers had to deal with grumpy villagers who had sometimes travelled up to 20km from out of town to watch but who missed out. I once watched a middle-aged expatriate plead to Dorras to get her, her husband and two visiting friends seats; the friends could only go that night, they especially wanted to see the play and had come half an hour early to get seats. But, by this time, the place was already full to overflowing and no one extra could be fitted in. The national newspaper even ran an item advising audience members to turn up early to avoid disappointment and Vanua Fire, a fire dance troupe from the WSB yut senta, stood on standby to give any turned-away guests an alternative show. The phrase “Melanesian time” is sometimes used to describe the habitually loose deadlines that characterise many activities in ni-Vanuatu society but the enthusiastic demands of audiences upon WSB have certainly broken this mould. From 2012, WSB began to sell only pre-purchased tickets to its big plays in the hope that this would prevent people missing out and wasting their bus money.
High demand also meant the seating arrangement changed after I left Vanuatu. In a cast and crew meeting following the Opening Night, Walker talked of changing the seating to fit more people in. This involved removing the audience exit, which lay in between the tiered seating and contained some scenes, such as Ezekiel and Lisa wining and dining in the restaurant. The fill-in of seating thus meant the cast needed to change their exits and entrances. The restaurant scene, for example, would be put on a stage thrust in the middle of the audience mats. Walker said to the company, “professionals may say it looks flat, no depth, but [we] must adapt to the audience” (Fieldnotes, May 9, 2011). He also spoke of changing the theatre building to increase the audience space, either by building a new theatre, taking the sound studio out or lifting the roof to solve future space problems.

Since *Old Stories* in 1991, the audiences have not only greatly shaped the acting and design of the shows but also the writing, directing and performing of them. Through their years of experience, Walker and Dorras have found that their audiences prefer plays revolving around narratives and demand entertainment, especially with so many children present. Hence, the company not only incorporates comedy and slapstick into their big plays but also a wide range of music, songs and dance. Dorras explains,

A play that is dead serious all the way through...they're a hard act, and in – for our audience who is not a theatre going audience, they're not going to sit there. If you bore them they're going to be really riotous, you've got to give them something. I sort of imagine it as a bit Shakespearean where you have...the groundlings throwing oranges at the actors when they got pissed off. (Personal communication, May 11, 2011)
In rehearsals, Walker kept at the forefront of his mind what the audience would want and respond to, placing their needs ahead of conventional notions of theatrical “excellence”. At times when a certain kind of acting would be highly effective in a more Western theatrical environment, it would be dismissed if it was thought that the ni-Vanuatu audience would not appreciate it. In other words, notions of theatrical excellence became localised, sensitive to the taste of the ni-Vanuatu audiences. During a full run-through, for example, Titus began to add in dramatic pauses, which gave great effect to the meaning of his words and the scenes he was in. In the notes afterwards Walker commented, “Lots of pauses today. Good if audience is with you, but not if they are restless. Don’t make longer. But nice play and rhythm. Continue to change it up, good to see how audience reacts” (Fieldnotes, April 12, 2011). In this way, and with the other observations made, the audience has greatly contributed to the style and production of Zero Balans and the other big plays.

**Dialogic Theatre**

The demand for entertainment by the audience and the wide range of performance styles, however, did not result in the company dealing with the political and social issues in Vanuatu in a superficial manner. Nor did it prevent the audience from being serious about said issues. In fact, as mentioned earlier, it stimulated dialogue. While the following chapter will detail the sophisticated use of the various performance styles incorporated in the play, it must be said that they supported a narrative which, while not explicitly referencing the practice of Freire or Boal, still fostered a certain kind of critical consciousness-raising and could be said to constitute a Freirean-style codification of key social issues. The narrative of Zero Balans looked at the problems of political corruption and land leasing, unemployment and gender
inequality as a whole, and explored many of the economic, political and socio-cultural contributions linked to these issues, while not putting the blame solely on one person. The narrative, furthermore, concluded in an open-ended way with no resolutions to these problems. In fact: the villagers of Lagun Saed were kicked off the land with nowhere to go to make room for foreign development; the corrupt politicians stayed in government; Ezekiel’s marriage remained in tatters and he recognised he had no idea how to be wan gud fella man.

Although WSB utilised dialogic story-telling, they did not follow the practice of having a joker facilitating the performance or an official discussion after the performance. Instead, official discussions between WSB and the public took the form of information gathering. WSB conducted 439 pre-surveys and 80 post surveys with Zero Balans audience members. Volunteers conducted the pre-surveys in the theatre before the performance started and asked four questions: “How did you hear about Zero Balans?” “Have you come to WSB before?” “What have you come to WSB for in the past?” “Are the MPs doing a good job?” (WSB, 2011, pp. 72-73). For the post surveys, a FrontlineSMS computer programme sent mass text messages to the mobile phones of the participants. The respondents replied via text message to the questions: “What did you think of Zero Balans?” “What did you like/dislike?” and “Do you think the play was a realistic portrayal of life in Vanuatu?” (WSB, 2011, p. 73). According to the 2011 Annual Report, “Previously, it had been difficult to collect information immediately after audience members watched the play, as they would be in a hurry to leave afterwards” (WSB, 2011, p. 72), and in an interview with Titus he similarly referred to the pragmatics of discussing issues after a two-hour play in the evening and how long it would take to work through all the issues explored. For
Titus, the big plays perform a different role to their small touring plays and workshops,

Like we say a small bag contains small thing [to discuss with the audience and pull apart]....In a big production like Zero Balans, a big play...there are a lot of things inside the play and people learn a lot of things and there are some things inside to discuss and go back home and talk to friends about it or at the nakamal or home....It throws a big question mark for you to go home and talk about it, not with me...we just take, get the cloth off out from the picture and we show them, this is the picture...this is what’s happening in Vanuatu, let’s talk about what’s happening in Vanuatu....Sometimes it shows the answer, and sometimes it gives a question mark for people to go back home and on a bus back home say, “Wow I think if we, if we, if we”, or “I think this is what, they, they, kind of talk about.” (Personal communication, May 12, 2011)

The role of the big plays are to paint such a compelling picture of issues in Vanuatu, through all manner of techniques, including narrative codification and problem-posing, that the audience members cannot help but be involved in the performances and talk about it afterwards. As Geertz writes, “the perception of something important in either particular works or in the arts generally moves people to talk (and write) about them incessantly” (1976, p. 1474). In the case of Zero Balans, an organised discussion after the play was never needed as discussions of its issues went beyond family, friends and the nakamal to spurring on national public debate. On Monday the 9th of May 2011, the Vanuatu Daily Post, a national newspaper, placed a front-page review of Zero Balans called “‘Zero Balans’ fever hitting Port Vila.” The author, Jane Joshua, referred to the play as “the talk on everyone’s lips”
(2011, p. 1) and highlighted that politicians and voters were both responsible for corruption and must plan for the future of the whole country. *Zero Balans* also became the topic of a talkback show on national radio, creating some animated discussions (WSB, 2001, p. 20). These discussions continued on a *Zero Balans* Facebook page, which the WSB IT Manager created and is now dedicated to WSB Productions with 572 members as of writing. WSB further integrated the play with other community workshops and initiatives, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

“Not a Theatre Going Audience”

So far this chapter has portrayed unique participatory processes within the performances of *Zero Balans*, and afterwards, as the audience continued to dialogue in private and public spaces. Now, I turn to consider briefly why the audience participated in the way that it did. Dorras’ previous comment about the audience “not [being] a theatre going audience” (Personal communication, May 11, 2011), provides a starting point. As the majority of the public either did not grow up with or did not have much knowledge of traditional Western theatre, they may not have been bound by the behavioural rules normally attached when watching. For in contrast to Fiji or Papua New Guinea, indigenous theatre within Vanuatu did not predominantly spring from the expatriate theatre community, schools or universities, but rather from WSB itself (see Rubin, 1998). When I asked Helen about a long-established repertory theatre building on Lini Highway she replied, “That’s for white people”, and one male actor also previously informed Taylor and Gaskell that the public now refer to any overseas theatre group as “Smolbag”: 
And in Vila whenever they see another theatre group from another play they go “Hey that’s Smolbag from Solomons” but they don’t understand that that’s got a totally different name it’s not Smolbag. But they always say “When we go to town we saw this Smolbag … the Smolbag that came from Fiji, and the Smolbag …” every other theatre will be Smolbag whether …, yeah so… to others it’s a Smolbag. Every theatre group is a Smolbag group...[WSBM6]

(2007, pp. 18-19)

The grassroots nature of Smolbag and its extensive reach into many ni-Vanuatu communities means that WSB, together with its audiences, has shaped a population’s conception of what theatre is. This was made evident by the difference between the learned responses of the guest night and the rest of the audiences. Most nights, at the conclusion of the performance the audiences did not clap in appreciation when the lights faded to black or as the actors entered the stage to take a bow. Rather, they only started clapping when the actors themselves clapped the audience and the lighting and sound operators. Sometimes, a few people did clap when the actors walked on stage and I always began clapping after the fade to black, but the majority did not follow our lead. At the guest night, however, the dignitaries all clapped at the fade to black and at the end of scenes they greatly appreciated, and laughed in the appropriate, scripted places.

Likewise, in a country where Western and Asian media have become a large source of entertainment, WSB is the only provider of Vanuatu film, television drama and large theatrical productions. Hence, Zero Balans may have also received such an enthusiastic response and a willingness to participate because ni-Vanuatu got to see themselves and their lives on a big stage. As one of the WSB cameramen exclaimed at the end of a performance, “It’s us! It’s us on stage!” This identification would not
have just come through the relevant narratives and issues of the play, but also through the set, casting, language, props, costume and music. This includes a large, ni-Vanuatu cast of different ages speaking in “town” Bislama, within a peri-urban settlement, with costumes such as Mother Hubbard dresses, props such as kava shells and large tin kettles, and the playing of gospel, hip-hop, reggae and string band music.

Going to other public events such as concerts, fundraisers, festivals and even church, would have prepared the audience to participate in Zero Balans. I witnessed a few gatherings, in particular at the Center Ville Christian Center and an international boxing match, where the crowd was extremely lively and interactive with the stage. Furthermore, as well as involvement in contemporary ni-Vanuatu dance and music, the interweaving of historical performative elements—dance, storytelling, songs, music, sculpture, costume, et cetera—within kastom and village life would have also provided a foundation for people to participate in the big plays.

Lastly, there were other daily forms of participation within their culture that helped the audience to participate in Zero Balans. For the most part, the audience lives in settlements and villages where their homes stand in close proximity to one another with no fences separating them. Together with their communal way of living, it thus becomes easier for everyone to see, hear, comment and be part of each other’s business; like living without the “fourth wall”. In everyday circumstances I further noticed that ni-Vanuatu in Port Vila are not afraid to express their thoughts, or speak

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38 The type of Bislama spoken in the play contains town idioms and more English than the Bislama spoken in rural areas.
39 A Mother Hubbard dress is a long, wide, loosing fitting dress with a high neck. The missionaries introduced this form of dress to Melanesian and Polynesian women. Ni-Van women have evolved the dress by shortening the length to the calf, shortening the arm length to just above or below the elbow, slightly lowering the neck line, using bright tropical patterned material and sometimes adding tassels.
their mind in a way that could generate conflict, as talking the conflict through brings resolution. This forthright speaking is part of the *sarem toktok* (sharing talking) sensibility within the country which is manifested in other ways such as, *kastom* conflict-resolution, oral storytelling and in *Zero Balans* rehearsals, which will be detailed further below.

**The Community and Creation of Zero Balans**

Many TfD practitioners advocate for participation to go beyond community involvement during the performance to community involvement in the creation process. As Sloman writes, “Participatory theatre is made for and by the community” and thus “form[s] a sense of ownership” within them (2011, p. 44). I have been arguing that WSB’s big plays are not “textbook” TfD in terms of audience participation but it must be said that in relation to this wider notion of participation, the company has an exemplary track record. While Walker and Dorras came to Vanuatu as expatriates and while the company still owes much to their energy and commitment, from the very start WSB has employed ni-Vanuatu locals in key roles right throughout the company. The actors and crew of *Zero Balans* live in peri-urban settlements and villages in and around Port Vila, with most either having worked only for the NGO or been with it for a long time. (I also got the sense that the newer actors and musicians would continue to work with WSB for an extensive period of time.) In fact, one of the actors has been with the NGO since its inception, several grew up as children acting with the company and others, despite a lack of experience, had a pathway to working as a performer through an audition process. Importantly, those employed for the big plays (together with *Love Patrol*, workshops and the small touring plays) are not necessarily exempt from the issues the company
explores on stage. Company members have experienced unemployment, homelessness, living on the streets, hunger, teenage pregnancy, both sides of gender violence and one cast member, as a result of having polio, has a withered foot requiring him to use crutches to move around.40 41 Granted other members have not experienced such difficulties but, whatever their backgrounds, working in the company has given the actors and crew a chance to be employed, to speak about issues in Vanuatu, to be part of big challenging projects and to take responsibility for their own actions. As public figures who are often recognised on the streets of Port Vila, the NGO requires the members of the company to act with integrity and be role models for the community on issues that the NGO talks about. In other words it is not wise for them to be drunk in public or hit their partner. If a member of the company is behaving in a way that is detrimental to themselves, their family or the company, then the senior leaders of the company, Ronald, Merilyn and Angela (in consultation with Walker and Dorras), will address the problem and develop a solution.

One of the reasons why TfD scholars exhibit a bias against more-or-less conventional, pre-scripted, narrative theatre is that there are, as mentioned in Chapter Two, many case studies of pre-scripted plays being used for “community theatre” without community involvement. Sloman, for instance, disapproves of a project she worked on in South-East Asia where an international agency sponsored a “central theatre training body…[to] work with theatre groups in the outer lying

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40 In a visit the following year, this actor had a wheelchair.
41 An actor, who starred in previous big plays and Love Patrol, had been suspended from working with WSB due his unwholesome actions. One day he hung around WSB with two friends and came into the nutrition centre when a worker from the publications centre and I were the only ones left. I was full from lunch, had not eaten all my soup and the worker was eating it. The actor came up to us, said he was starving and had no money for food, could he finish the soup off? We said yes, and he shoveled it into his mouth quickly.
regions” (2011, p. 50). She writes that the agency gave the groups a “set play written away from the community”, meaning they had no say in content development (2011, p. 50). By contrast, WSB has, over time, garnered such a strong reputation for relevant, exciting, community-engaged theatre that AusAID and NZAid give the NGO free reign with script composition. In the case of Zero Balans, these major funding bodies asked only for the production to be of “high quality” (WSB, 2011, p. 19). Much of the labour of script development for a full-length, two-hour play falls on Dorras, whose skills and experience as a writer are critical to the company, however throughout the drafting process she draws on the expertise of other WSB members.  

42 Dorras began writing Zero Balans in October of 2010 knowing that it needed to be ready by February 2011. She speaks of this initial stage, saying

I mean I just wrote endless shit, cause you destroy, I think this is true for many writers – I’ve heard people say it – you destroy more than you ever keep...Cause you write, like discovering your characters involves writing and writing and writing and writing and throwing stuff away and throwing stuff away and so on...I must have started the play about ten times. (Personal communication, May 11, 2011)

An in-depth process of script development followed. Titus informed me that with a big play script, Dorras gives the company the first half or the first full draft of the play for them to look at the issues, narrative and cultural references, and see if its “funny or not funny...magic or not magic” (Personal communication, May 12, 2011). Discussions take place in the group, right down to swear words—which generally the men love and the women do not—and the process continues until the final script

42 Over the years, WSB have provided scriptwriting training to develop new writers, but so far the WSB and Port Vila communities have not readily taken this up.
is finished. In the words of Titus, “You ask Jo, and Jo attach the latest script again” (Personal communication, May 12, 2011). On the 20th of March, Dorras completed the final script of Zero Balans but changes continued re-drafting right throughout the rehearsal period in response to what was happening in the rehearsal room, either changing lines that were not sitting well with the actors or drawing inspiration from their ever-present penchant for adlibbing. At the end of the rehearsal period, Walker felt that in one of the last scenes Lisa would not tell Ezekiel he was “wan gud fellam man” so easily because of all the “shit [that] has happened to her because of him.” He further said, “In reality, there wouldn’t be this almost forgiveness…it need[s] to come naturally” (Fieldnotes, May 3, 2011). So Dorras re-wrote the scene and the actors playing Lisa and Ezekiel learnt the new script on Tuesday the 3rd of May, the morning of the family show.

As well as participating in the script development, the actors and crew worked on the stage production together. Ben (who plays both Derrick the politician and Steven, Willie’s best friend), designed the lighting plan and co-ordinated the rigging with Walker. Jimmy (who plays both the Jif and the Prime Minister) took up the role of their right hand man, and a group of actors (four to six depending on the day) volunteered to rig and patch the lights with them. Meanwhile, the lighting operator designed and built the bamboo stage with other WSB workers and later plotted the lighting with Walker during rehearsals. The sound technician recorded and edited voice-overs in the studio and created sound effects, and his wife, Grace, together with Samuel, one of the musicians, wrote the music for the songs. Ronald performed odd jobs about the place like cutting and re-making extension leads and Angela, the Stage Manager, took charge of costumes and props. She organised various actors to
go to the tailor and the rest planned and shopped for their costumes in second hand stores with Dorras helping and checking over their choices. Furthermore, the actors organised their own clothing during performances and actors with smaller roles helped Angela with shifting the props on and off-stage.

As a director, Walker gave a lot of scope and encouragement for his actors to find their own performance solutions, not the outward appearances of their characters but also their physicality and psychological motivation. The actress, Lewani, in charge of the scripts, acted as a de-facto assistant director in this regard, often spending extra time with an individual as they learnt their lines and analysed their meaning. In rehearsals, Walker called for actors to reach the heart of the lines so that their acting did not appear to be a message from WSB. He stood on stage with them, working together—going over and over each scene, trying ideas, exploring and creating. On the one hand, Walker was decisive at times with what he wanted to happen, but on the other hand would often say, “Just giving ideas” and “you don’t have to do it my way”. He gave everyone freedom to speak, play and develop on the rehearsal floor. In turn, the actors loved to adlib, add-on to lines and play with verbal and physical humour, and Walker only reined such activity in when it caused confusion or went “overboard”. In a rehearsal of a scene where the five politicians meet to discuss the land deal, four of the actors ad-libbed so much that one actor could not keep up and never spoke the scripted line needed to go onto the next wave of ad-libbing. The other actors told him each time that it was his line, but he never knew which line to say. At this point did Walker direct them to stick with the script and only add on a few lines to avoid such confusion.
The actors were very open and direct with each other during rehearsals. They always spoke their mind to one another saying, "You miss line" or speaking the lines themselves when an actor forgot them. On top of this, they gave each other unsolicited suggestions on how to act; even those not acting in the scene put their two cents worth in. Some of these discussions heated up as everyone talked at the same time and the more an actor struggled with their part, the more actors felt invited to join in and give help. Such interactions, however, were not disorderly or insensitive, but rather the way that the actors worked together to achieve a high quality performance and how they resolved problems or weaknesses as a group. These interactions further revealed a high level of trust between the actors to give and take instruction, and a confidence in their ability to contribute. In a rehearsal of the reggae-hip-hop dance scene, where Willie threatens Lisa through rap and hip-hop dance, the actor playing Willie (Joshua) had trouble coordinating the rap, dancing and percussion beat together. Walker, Helen and Grace (who alternated playing Lisa and her cousin Sandra), Ben (as Willie’s best friend, Steven) and Samuel, all worked with Joshua to get it right. Samuel played the beat on the bongo drum, Walker directed the floor movement, Grace sung the song, Helen discussed and acted the scene with him, and Ben danced beside him and gave blocking suggestions. Such readiness to help was most keenly observed on the morning of Tuesday the 26th of April, eight days before the family night and the arrival of the Helt Fors team back from touring a play to learn their roles as villagers. Walker’s aim for the day was to run through all of the scenes the Helt Fors actors would be in and teach them their roles. These roles ranged from being villagers in Lagun Saed community scenes, to taking props on and off the stage, to speaking a couple of lines to a main character. Before this day, the company had been performing all these roles and knew them
inside out, and they were eager to help teach the *Helt Fors* actors. This eagerness meant that they all assumed the role of “assistant director” to Walker. Through the day, Walker stepped through the scenes of the villagers and as he did each company actor naturally explained the scene to one or more newcomers and instructed them on their different roles. Because the company actors were so eager to instruct the *Helt Fors* actors, Walker did not need to lead the whole run-through and left the rehearsal room at short intervals to turn his attention to other needs in the NGO. Generally the actors and musicians knew the play so well that an actor could step in if another actor could not play their role for one reason or another. Helen, for instance, who normally alternated between the roles of Lisa and her cousin Sandra, stepped in to play an angel in a performance and a *Helt Fors* actress stepped in to play Sandra. In rehearsals, if one of the musicians did not turn up, the other one took on both roles as best he could and other actors, such as Joshua, would fill in back stage, and in one performance Abu decided to play the ukulele during the fundraising scene.

After a long rehearsal or run-through, the cast and crew would gather in a circle, usually at the front stage right corner, on mats, chairs and the rostra. There, they discussed their performance. Walker normally held pages of notes on white A4 paper in his hands, but always gave room for the team to comment first, asking questions such as, “anything you think didn’t go well?” Everyone had the opportunity to speak, whether a small word of encouragement or a huge frustration with a scene and what others were doing wrong. All opinions were validated, responded to and worked through as a group, and then the director would read through, enact and discuss with the group his notes. Before important run-throughs,
Walker likewise gathered the group together in a circle on stage to give direction and focus, always asking if anyone wanted to say something, which someone always did.

“One Big, Annoying Family”

One afternoon at the end of a lunch break, as Helen and I were walking towards the theatre, Helen referred to the company as “one big, annoying family.” Later in a more formal interview, she said, “During rehearsals the other actors, they would come and see us and they would help us to get into the character more and more, you know in the play and stuff like that.” I asked, “So it's like a team effort, everyone helps each other?” She responded, “It’s more like a family where the others tell you ‘Do this! Do that!’” (Personal communication, May 10, 2011). With the mix of older and young actors, seasoned professionals and first timers, the company did resemble a family dynamic. At the head of the family were the mother and father, Dorras and Walker. Dorras was called “Mama Jo” within the NGO and Walker was sometimes called “olfala (old fella) Peter”. Next were Ronald, Merilyn and Angela. They have been with the WSB for a long time—Ronald since the beginning—and as the most senior members of the company, form its core leadership team. As mentioned earlier, if there are any serious issues that need to be addressed within the company, these three will address them and choose the solution or discipline needed. But they will also consult with Walker and Dorras on such matters. Following this senior group were the four “older brothers” called Titus, Jimmy, Ben and Neil. These older actors took their acting roles very seriously and, apart from Neil, who did not smoke, liked to step outside and share a not-so secret smoke of tobacco rolled in newspaper. They were not alone: Mathew, a cheeky, friendly and sometimes absent-minded actor,
young Joshua who was in his first play and the two musicians Samuel and Leo with their dread-locked hair all behaved like the younger brothers and also liked to step out of the rehearsal room for a “rollie”. Bobby, who moved around on crutches, came to rehearsals when needed but also helped lead the Rainbow Theatre group (another ensemble created by WSB, comprising actors with various kinds of disability) and hung around the base with different WSB community members; everyone knew who he was. Abu, the gentle old grandfather, swept the stage regularly with a grass broom, readily helped with any jobs, fell asleep in meetings and made hand-made rollies for the actors to buy. Then the rest of the women: Sara, Lewani, Grace and Helen. All women were responsible, organised, turned up to rehearsals on time, knew their lines and made sure everyone was fed. The youngest, Helen, socialised with the guys and loved to tease everyone, especially Walker.\footnote{43 At the end of the play, the two angels leave Ezekiel to target another corrupt leader or organisation. The actors changed the place they were heading each day. In rehearsals, jokes would fly between the angel actors, the director and those actors who were watching, saying things like: “Next stop, Canberra”. Helen would say, “Next stop, house blong Peter Walker” (Peter Walker’s house).} The sound engineer and the lighting operator, both long-time workers with the NGO, joined the group half-way through the rehearsals and, towards the end of rehearsals, “Uncle” Morrison, five young male and two female “cousins” (a.k.a. the Helt Fors team) arrived. In some cases, this cast and crew were not just like family; they were family. As well as Walker and Dorras, there were two couples with two small children, a young couple who were dating and two male actors who were in relationships with other WSB workers. The Company operated like a family too. They ate a breakfast of *khumala* (sweet potato) bread with homemade peanut butter and tea or coffee from the Nutrition Centre before rehearsals each morning, and Grace made toasted sandwiches for everyone to buy. These sandwiches were most often eaten on top of
the *khumala* bread or saved for snacks later in the day. Before performances, they often ate a dinner of chicken, rice and vegetables together. If I brought a newspaper to the theatre, it would be passed round and read by everyone before I had a chance to look at it.

In other words, the company were not just involved with each other's lines and character development, but also with their personal lives. Walker stopped rehearsals several times for the company to attend funerals, and actors could miss rehearsals for family reasons, including travelling to their home island. In addition, the sister of Ben was admitted to hospital with an undiagnosed blood condition and Ben was encouraged to leave rehearsals to find blood donors for her. In contrast, in a culture where family comes first before everything else, the play could be just as important, if not more important, than family life. The older sister of Neil died on Pentecost Island towards the end of the rehearsal period, yet his family chose for him to stay and act in the play and said he could travel back later for her fifty-day memorial. This shows the recognition by family members of the importance of Neil and WSB's work to the community at large. Another example illustrating how close-knit this community was relates to Walker and Dorras. One Saturday afternoon, they got lost in the bush around Lololima with no mobile phone communication. The lighting operator and the CEO led WSB search parties for the two, including a few of the Vanuatu Military Force (VMF), and found them. The WSB staff told them off and Walker and Dorras later threw their rescuers a big thank you party. Earlier in the rehearsal period Walker and Dorras took the company (and me) for a team-building, half-day walk to the Lololima Cascades. The team walked through farmland, bush and a river, helped each other over crevices and jumped off waterfalls. Afterwards,
we went to their home for lunch and to watch two DVDs as inspiration. Dinner, kava and stories from Abu then followed until late into the night. To refer back to the words of Rahnema, “the many dimensions of participation go...deep into the heart of human relationships and the socio-cultural realities conditioning them” (2009, p. 144), and for WSB this was found in another form of “family”, where their relationships came before the project itself. The members of the company extended participation beyond equality, rights and empowerment to community, friendship and belonging. Rahnema and WSB point towards a participatory approach, which does not require a methodology or format to ensure successful human interaction, but rather one that builds on relationships: the annoying, bossy, dedicated, playful and caring family of the company provides a real example of how humans work and bond together through TFD performances.

**A Wider Community of Family and Friends**

This openness within the company extended to the rest of the WSB base and community. Gay McAuley writes of traditional Western theatre that “[t]heatre practitioners have traditionally regarded the rehearsal period as private: they rarely admit outsiders or observers” (1998, p. 75), yet, during rehearsals of *Zero Balans*, the company opened all the doors to the theatre wide to let the breeze in and allow community members to walk in. Sometimes a worker or volunteer walked through the theatre to reach another area of the base and administration staff walked up and down the tiered rostra to reach their office above the audience seating. These interlopers never distracted the actors from the task at hand. On weekends or after school, young children of the actors watched rehearsals on the mats accompanied by their bags of activities and food, and their teenagers sat in the audience. Then, as the
rehearsals progressed from singular scenes to full run-throughs with sound and lighting, increasing numbers of children and youth stepped in to quietly watch, with office and Yut Senta workers also popping in. These watchers grew from a couple, to seven, ten, nineteen, until one rehearsal on Thursday the 28th of April I counted approximately thirty-four people watching in the dark.

The company also integrated with and supported the rest of the WSB community. Friends working or volunteering in other areas of the base called in to say hello or hang out before rehearsals in the morning and during breaks. The noise of other activities wafted through the open rehearsal doors, like the constant reggae beat from the music room or one day a modern gospel song repeatedly played for hours upon hours in the adjacent building. Walker writes,

[All] of us agree[] how much we prefer theatre to film! and just being around the centre..a hiphop class to the left of you, a game of hockey or futsal to the right; staff of all sizes doing zumba on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The laughter of Rainbow theatre...joining a rockstep class. All this and lunch at the nutrition centre. Those of us who do Love Patrol in the second half of the year miss this unique environment when we go on location. (2013, March 29, para. 1)

On weekdays, the morning rehearsals finished in time for lunch at the nutrition centre. From 12-1pm, WSB employees, volunteers, youth and groups sit together on the wooden benches at wooden tables. At these lunches, I met many of the WSB community, including the members of Rainbow Theatre. One particular woman from this group was in a wheelchair and had no hands, yet constantly beamed a huge, joyful smile to everyone she saw. At these lunches she loved it when I came over and
held her stumps, shaking them—as I would a hand—as we talked. The WSB community see the company as leaders and role models. Members of the company take part and lead other WSB events and initiatives to inspire the community, including attending official funding signings between donors and WSB, and cleaning up the Tagabe River nearby. On Wednesday afternoons, Bobby left Zero Balans rehearsals to work with Rainbow Theatre who were improvising a play based on a kastom story about a man who has to face three challenges. They were to perform it for the youngest students of various Port Vila schools and the company and other workers watched the dress rehearsal to give them a practice audience. We sat in a circle to create the stage and the actors invited us to sing along, clap and shake a piece of cloth circling the stage. The actors forgot their lines and needed prodding by the director and Bobby but wore the largest smiles on their faces and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The audience enthusiastically joined in, smiled and gave words of encouragement throughout the performance.\(^{44}\) Also during the rehearsal period, an urban reggae band from the yut senta called Young Life entered a global music video competition on anti-corruption with the lighting operator filming their video. They won one of the three entries (beating 109 other contestants) to perform at the Global Youth Anti-Corruption Network Forum in Nairobi, Kenya (see Young Life, 2011 to watch their video). The NGO put on a fundraiser for the band, consisting of a kava pit and concert. The two musicians played, Ralph Regenvanu presented their award, and Walker, Dorras, members of the company and I attended, each donating a gold coin.

\(^{44}\) See Wilson, 2014 for more information on the latest work of Rainbow Theatre.
The actors are also personally involved with important political issues. In 2012, the company produced another season of *Zero Balans* in Port Vila and then in Luganville. During the season in Vila, individual members of the company joined the Free West Papua movement in a peaceful protest at the airport, demonstrating against an arriving plane carrying police and agricultural aid from Indonesia. Walker explains,

> Many are cross at the government's handling of the AFP situation...on the one hand saying that Australia has acted in a high handed way and then accepting aid from a country that suppresses their fellow Melanesians in West Papua. (2012, May 19, para. 1)

At the protest, the police arrived in riot gear, arrested the protestors (those who did not run away) and detained them overnight. This included fifteen members of WSB, so the CEO went to the station and demanded to be charged with them. The next morning the police charged the group with “unlawful assembly and trespassing on government owned property with malicious intent” (Walker, 2012, May 19, para. 2). Walker goes on to write that the arrested “gave a brilliant show, *Zero Balans*, that evening with several bits seeming to have extra resonance...Afterwards we sat around and people told their stories of the day” (2012, May 19, para. 2). Another protest, of a different sort, occurred later in December of that year concerning one of the cast, Abu, the old man of great heart and generosity who loved to get alongside the young people and of whom I have already written a good deal in this thesis. This is a difficult story to relate and I will defer to Walker’s account of the incident:

> [A] drunk youth...trying to drive away from a fight...ran [Abu] over and...dragged him along the road. Angry residents stoned the bus. The owner of the bus returned with a gang, smashing up people’s houses in the street
including that of [Abu] and his wife. Perhaps he had been unaware of why his bus had been stoned. [Abu] died in hospital the next day....His funeral became a march through town to the cemetery; one of the biggest seen in Vila....[The marchers called for] trouble makers to be sent back [to their home islands] and for the police to respond to calls. (2013, March 20, para. 3)

The first touring play of 2013 subsequently became a 45-minute piece of verbatim theatre on violence. Although both incidents occurred in the year after my fieldwork with WSB, they strongly exemplified the closeness of the actors to social and political issues in Port Vila, and of their decision to be involved with these issues outside of official WSB activities. Moreover, they show how these experiences then feed back into the theatrical work.

**A Network of Participation**

Sloman writes,

> Participatory theatre will have a deeper impact the more multidimensional the project is, particularly if it is linked to the broader picture of development in the community and nation and includes other development tools. As Klotz (2002, p. 1) argues, "many programmes do not succeed because they operate from the premise that a theatrical piece on its own can initiate meaningful change in society." If projects work narrowly, then the outcomes too will be narrow. It is important to look at the whole picture, and if participatory processes are used successfully, this bigger picture should be identified, recognized and incorporated into the project. (2011, p. 53)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, WSB works toward a bigger picture of "[a] sustainable and well-governed Vanuatu where women, men and young men and
women participate in and contribute to their community’s development” (AusAID, 2009, p. 1). Hence, Zero Balans formed only a small part of their initiatives on good governance, gender relations and youth. Preceding chapters refer to these other activities, such as the Yut Senta and providing educational resources, but they have also partnered with Vanuatu government departments and CSOs like the Department of Women’s Affairs and the VWC. In addition to the 2011 Zero Balans season, twelve Port Vila chiefs attended a two-day workshop at WSB. The workshop included watching Zero Balans and discussing the issues raised afterwards. It covered the role of MPs, voter responsibility, electoral rights and corruption, with a senior civil servant and principal electoral officer coming in as special guests. Next WSB held the same workshop with 47 Efate rural chiefs and young leaders nominated to become a chief in their community (WSB, 2011, pp. 11-12 & 38). Teachers then participated in similar workshops with the re-run of Zero Balans in 2012. Other governance workshops in 2011 included screening a governance film called Eniwan i luk Rose (“Has anyone seen Rose?”) in the remote areas of Big Bay, Santo and North Tanna, and five Luganville communities. 2,130 people went to the screenings, post-screen discussions and activities. In addition, 319 local politicians, women and youth representatives attended eleven one-day workshops on human rights, gender equality and the work of MPs. Eighteen people from different islands also attended a four-day Governance Committee workshop and sixty members of the Port Vila yut senta participated in three different forums on diabetes, domestic violence and a face to face meeting with local members of parliament, organised by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy. While the main cast began rehearsing for Zero Balans in 2011, the Helt Fors team toured North Efate, South Santo, South West Malekula, South Tanna, eight Port Vila and Luganville communities and nineteen
senior secondary schools with an improvised sexual harassment and offences play, followed by discussions. 4,500 people participated in total (WSB, 2011, p. 12). Zero Balans was the first big play to centre directly on politics and the next two big plays followed suit: Janis ia Nao (“Now’s our Chance”) in 2012 focused on the lead up to an election and Klaem long lada (“Climb the Ladder”) in 2013 revolved around politics and organised crime. In early 2012, before the re-run of Zero Balans, the company toured improvised plays on corrupt MPs, cash, cargo and voting in the outer islands. This brief overview of additional WSB activities related to the themes of Zero Balans does not include all of the work on governance, gender issues and young people in those years, but it does give a taste of the extensive work the NGO puts in, right across the archipelago, to educate and involve ni-Vanuatu in creating a better future for themselves and demonstrates how TfD can have a wider, deeper and more ongoing impact upon a society if it is part of or creates a network of participation with other projects, organisations and communities.

In addition, because WSB builds relationships with people, communities and organisations in many areas, it enables the audiences to have a sense of connection with WSB beyond the one-off big play performances. In the case of Zero Balans, even before the first person entered the theatre building to watch the play, there was already an existing relationship between WSB, its stage and its audiences. Many had been to WSB before: in a survey of 439 Zero Balans audience members, 92% had visited the base before to see another play, go to a workshop, the yut senta, KPH Clinic or to play sports (WSB, 2011, p. 73). Some, as mentioned earlier, even watched the rehearsals of the play. If they had not been to the Vila base before, they could have easily encountered the NGO and the issues they portray through one of their
radio plays, *Love Patrol* on TV, films, short-play tours, workshops, school programmes, educational cartoons, the media, word on the street or public protests.

The popularity of the NGO is exemplified by all taxi and bus drivers knowing where “Smolbag” is without instructions and the fact that audience members came from all around Vila and up to 20km outside of the city to watch *Zero Balans*. Because of such connections and the greater relationship network built between WSB and the Port Vila community, when they all converge into one mutual space for a particular project, there is a greater capacity for all parties to shape and be shaped by each other through the medium of performance.

Needless to say, this does not mean that all in the Port Vila community want to participate in or form relationships with WSB. Even though WSB receives plenty of admiration, respect and involvement, it also receives criticism, usually from political and religious figures. Church elders have been known to condemn the KPH clinic and the education of the NGO on contraception as opposed to abstinence (in one case, an elder reneged on his criticism after his teenage daughter fell pregnant and the KPH clinic became instrumental in helping her with healthcare). One night at a church youth conference, the father of the family I lived with introduced me to a group of young men from some other islands. He said I was researching WSB, but quickly added that they should not be a part of it because the youth there smoke marijuana and drink kava.\(^{45}\) Some politicians have also made it known that they do not like the NGO’s interest in political governance

\(^{45}\) In response, my mouth fell open in shock as WSB bans marijuana from its bases and educates schools and communities through its various programmes on the repercussions of excessive kava drinking. Some of the members of WSB and participants may over-use these substances at times, but this does not mean they are excluded from the community and disciplinary measures are enforced when required. As referred to earlier, the company members know that they are community leaders and well known faces, especially if they act in *Love Patrol*, and therefore, must behave accordingly.
or their challenging of big men in Zero Balans (see Walker, 2011, May 28; Daily digester, 2012). But instead of dismissing these criticisms the NGO uses them to further dialogue on issues in future projects (thus, the company continued to perform on different political issues and the MPs in the next two big plays).

**Keeping it in the Family**

Nevertheless, the most important aspect of community participation is consistency on the part of those initiating the projects. As Sloman notes, “A common issue that has happened in the embrac[ing] of theatre as a tool for development has been a culture of setting up theatre groups in communities, but not offering continued support – expecting that they will automatically be sustainable” (2011, p. 51). WSB could not run without continued support, particularly from its tripartite agreement with AusAID and NZAid. This is not to say that continual support means relying on outside help to run projects or to provide motivation and guidance. The NGO remains adamant that it is a local organisation in all aspects. They do require a few carefully chosen inputs to fill in gaps, such as a couple of VSA volunteers or an overseas director of photography for Love Patrol, but these inputs are also brought in to train local workers to fill such gaps, and the NGO predominantly works with its own resources and skills, which develop over time and with each project. In the same way, the company connects with and learns from foreign scholars, performers, practitioners and technicians, but does not depend on them or regularly fly them in and out to help. To date, WSB has produced ten big plays over twenty-three years, with six of them having had return seasons. The sustainability of the NGO thus comes down
to the constant day-in, day-out effort of ordinary locals working with their community with what they have.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have stressed the reasons why *Zero Balans*—as a more-or-less conventional, pre-scripted, narrative, full-length, play—cannot be critiqued as "non-participatory". Through my ethnographic participant-observation of the rehearsals and performances of the play, I found that it did not pander to simple consumerist desires. It did not implement a one-way, top-down pedagogy, as if the project was simply a vehicle for manipulative messages by the NGO or by AusAID and NZAid. It also did not sugar coat difficult issues in the hope that audiences might find the work palatable enough to be able to engage in dialogue about such sensitive issues after the event. Rather, I found that *Zero Balans* was a dialogic form of communication unto itself, created out of a local community and geared towards an intelligent audience, which was eager to participate and participate in a manner that they saw fit.

This intelligent audience was made up of grassroots communities from the urban centre, peri-urban settlements and villages, and villages from up to 20km away. This makeup is significant. As Gaskell and Taylor write:

[The small] plays were effective because they reached the whole community, particularly the women and children. If an expert comes to talk to a community, then often this discussion is considered “men’s talk” and intended
for the decision makers of the village. However, through a play, the theatre company accesses the whole community. (2007, p. 20)

By virtue of its size and location, Zero Balans built upon WSB’s work within these individual communities by enabling their men, women, youth and children to all join together as one community to discuss its social and political issues. This large convergence then stimulated the debate of the issues to go on to a national level through radio, the Daily Post and social media.

Such stimulation was aided by the highly charged aesthetic experience of the audiences and their active, embodied responses and interactions with the stage. It was also aided by other various participatory processes happening throughout and in conjunction with the TfD project. Along with WSB’s many other initiatives, the company operated like a family, working together as a team and opening their rehearsal doors to the WSB and wider community. They further supported, interacted and participated with these communities and their initiatives outside of the rehearsal space. All these forms of participation revolved around relationship building, connecting and community. This suggests that the NGO understands Rahnema’s argument that at the heart of participation is human relationships, rather than a method or formula (2009, p. 144). The details of this chapter also suggest that WSB likewise understand that being in-relation with the community means a continual, long process of shaping and being shaped by each other for the betterment of society. These findings stress that the definition of participation within TfD, and in applied theatre more generally, should be expanded. After all, is
not the heart of Freire and Boal’s own work, the restoration of humanity and its relationships at a societal level?
Chapter 5: Cultural Adaptation and the Resilience of Kastom

Introduction

As noted in Chapter Two, much of the debate around intercultural performance practices in TfD centres on the pros and cons of pressing local, indigenous cultural forms into the service of educational and developmental goals. Practitioners recognise that their projects need to be culturally relevant and that local cultural forms already have an in-built capacity to address the multiple layers surrounding a developmental issue in a society (Kerr, 2009). Nevertheless, there have been some political and ethical concerns over this process of appropriation and TfD practitioners have acknowledged that attempts to recontextualise indigenous forms may cause more harm than help to a community. In particular, the appropriation of ritual forms without respect for their original purposes runs the risk of damaging these forms (Colletta & Kidd, 1980) and TfD scholar-practitioners have been highly critical of international development agencies in this regard (Chinyowa, 2009; Colletta & Kidd, 1980; Kerr, 2009). Behind these hesitancies and criticisms lie broader concerns with regards to the role the development industry plays in cultural paternalism and homogeny. Chinyowa refers to “Rustom Bharucha (1993, 1996) [who] warns that interculturalism can become an ethnocentric practice that may be inseparable from the history of colonialism and Orientalism” (2009, p. 340). The solutions so far to these hesitancies, criticisms and concerns have been to call for anthropologists to go before TfD scholar-practitioners and advise them on what may or may not be effective in a certain community, and to place these decisions upon the local cultural workers and participants, who then integrate what they want into the
TfD project (Colletta & Kidd, 1980). Again, some organisations, such as Loke Nattya O Sanskritik Unnayan Kendro (LASOUK) in Bangladesh, have had success in directly co-opting relevant local popular forms of culture into development purposes (Ahsan, 2004), but many TfD practitioners initially approach intercultural projects with a Boal-based or similar process-oriented, participatory format that focuses on analysing and responding to the causes of structural oppression in a society. The process of cross-cultural consultation—inviting local cultural workers and participants to incorporate the local cultural forms that they feel should be included—often comes at a later stage of a project, as in the work of Haseman et al. (2014).

Perhaps the most surprising thing about these debates around intercultural or cross-cultural TfD work is the relative absence of discussion about the pros and cons of borrowing from Western aesthetic forms. Questions over adaptation and (mis)appropriation seem quite resolutely anchored in concerns over the frailty or resilience of indigenous cultures, rather than considering the possibility that a strong indigenous culture might well be one that knows how to borrow from foreign sources just as much as it knows how to adapt from within. As Syed Jamil Ahmed argues, if TfD is to provide an “in-depth analysis of the complexities of life” (2002, p. 212) and if this is not obviously enabled by existing indigenous performance genres (to bolster his argument, Ahmed cites the fatalistic narratives of some indigenous Bangladeshi plays), then “[w]hy is it not possible to expose indigenous theatre performers...to some of the finest wisdom in the world—to Freire and Boal, Stanislavsky and Brecht—and let them assimilate from this vast tradition?” (2002, p. 217). Essentially, his argument suggests that TfD practitioners should trust
indigenous performers a little more to know where borrowing from foreign sources is likely to be most judicious since

[w]hat indigenous theatre performers build within themselves, with years of experience, is a clear understanding of the psyche of the people—their dreams and hopes. They also carry within them an acute perception of how best to communicate with the people, especially in the rhythm of the language they use and the similes they employ. (Ahmed, 2002, p. 217)

Still, as Chinyowa suggests, “the shift towards an intercultural theatre paradigm in applied drama and theatre seems to be not yet fully developed” (2009, p. 340). In Chapter Two, I argued that this reflects a tendency in some theatre scholarship to abstract notions of performance and aesthetics from the practice of everyday life, thus underplaying the extent to which art is bound up in a “matrix of sensibility” (Geertz, 1976, p. 1481), whereby “the feeling a people has for life” (1976, p. 1475) is made manifest in, and linked to, all areas of their society, not just those practices that are deemed artistic.

It is against the background of these debates that Zero Balans may be considered; it is, as I have already suggested but will elaborate on further, a more-or-less conventional, narrative play in which a variety of Western aesthetic forms are borrowed for developmental purposes in a Pacific Island nation. Yet, it also highly engaged the local population and was a play they felt truly represented them in both topic and appearance. To understand how Zero Balans was “culturally efficacious” with Port Vila audiences—that is, how Zero Balans effectively connected and resonated with the ni-Vanuatu people and their culture—this chapter will address four distinct aspects of cultural appropriation within it. These are: the kinds of
aesthetic forms the company borrowed from and how they recontextualised them; the practical factors which influenced such borrowings and the attitudes involved; the cultural heritage of appropriating from foreign sources which has always existed within Vanuatu and the purposes for such action; and the use of these aesthetic forms to send messages to the audience through unspoken cultural codes. However, before presenting this analysis, it will help to bring the Geertzian approach for which I am arguing into a closer dialogue with mainstream theatre and performance studies scholarship that has tried to deal with vexed questions of (mis)appropriation in exchanges between “first world” and “third world” cultures.

**Innovation or Pillage? The Politics of Cultural Borrowing**

Typically, a key focus of debates on intercultural theatre practice is the power imbalance between those who are borrowing and those who are giving precious cultural resources. In other words, cultural appropriation is often seen as a zero-sum game played between rapacious “first world” theatre makers and disempowered “third world” cultural workers. There are, of course, several high-profile examples where the intercultural experiments of acclaimed and innovative Western theatre directors have attracted criticism for the ethically dubious nature of the exchange. Most notably, Indian critics of Peter Brook’s research process for his globally successful version of *The Mahabharata* rightly point out that Brook and his actors (apart from two members) portrayed a sense of entitlement and exploited the generosity of the (at times impoverished) hosts, gurus and performers in order to capture the envisioned “India” he sought. Such generosity included re-creating the full rituals outside of the ritual season for the company, which in turn was met with a lack of respect for the whole process, a lack of sharing in the experience and a lack of
cultural exchange, leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of informants. One of the hosts, Bengali director Porbir Buha, described the research process as “cultural piracy” (Zarilli, 1986, p. 98; also in Bharucha, 1988, p. 1647) and a typical case of “come...grab it and take it and go” (Zarilli, 1986, p. 96). In the words of John Russell Brown this situation is little more than theft (1998, p. 12), an accusation that he levels not only at Brook but also at figures such as Ariane Mnouchkine. Brown writes: “However worthily it is intended, intercultural theatrical exchange is, in fact, a form of pillage, and the result is fancy-dress pretence or, at best, the creation of a small zoo in which no creature has its full life” (1998, p. 14). To prevent the damage that occurs with such kinds of borrowing, Brown calls for theatre makers who are searching for sensibilities not found or experienced in their own culture to instead only import “invisible” (1998, p. 15) foreign techniques, such as audience-seating arrangements. Borrowing these “invisible” techniques would not explicitly alert the audience to a “foreignness” which, in the context of the international festivals where productions like The Mahabharata are often presented, often translates into a fetishising of “otherness” and a highly marketable veneer of cosmopolitanism.

Brown also believes that such subtler borrowings would run a lesser risk of offending those upon whose cultural practice one is drawing, leaving their traditional forms intact.

However, Craig Latrell (2000) reminds Brown, Bharucha and other scholars whom he feels tend to congregate under a political victim-victimiser framework that cultural appropriation is never entirely a one-way street; artists in non-Western and/or developing cultures are intentionally appropriating and decontextualising Western forms as well and often do so in innovative and fascinating ways. He argues
that since “the phenomenon of borrowing” is at the core of “artistic change and growth” (2000, p.49), appropriations need to “be examined as an aesthetic phenomenon” (2000, p. 47). This is not only because appropriations “deserve” it (Latrell, 2000, p. 47), but also the full narrative of the appropriation tends to be blocked if we view it solely through a political lens and fail to consider the complexities and the nuances of the innovation. Latrell writes:

> In this type of borrowing, what is important (whether the creator is Western or non-Western) is not what the novel element meant in its original context, but what it now says about the creator and the audience, and in this sense, the function of the imported technique has changed. (2000, p. 49)

Furthermore, in response to Brown’s proposal to build intercultural performance exchanges around the borrowing of subtle or “invisible” features of a traditional genre, Latrell rightly questions who would be the specific gatekeeper of such cultural exchange and how would they distinguish between the invisible, less-visible and the visible. After all, from a Geertzian perspective, all are just as much the sensibility of a culture as the other.

There is, however, a middle ground to be struck between the positions of Brown and Latrell. Clearly, they are writing about contexts that are different in degree, if not also in kind. Brown addresses his arguments to the work of well-funded directors like Brook, Mnouchkine and Ninagawa Yukio, many of whose most famous productions have been re-imaginings of Shakespeare in the trappings of “high” traditional genres from Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Latrell, by contrast, is looking at the work of much smaller theatre companies in Singapore and Indonesia, including practitioners of some relatively modern, very eclectic and popular genres such as the
*randai* performances of West Sumatra. The local context of appropriation and the nature of the aesthetic and political processes within it (whether these include an intimate dialogue with, or are independent of, the original source) will obviously influence the narrative surrounding the work. Brown is closer to Latrell’s position when he argues that appropriation from a foreign source has its greatest chance of success if it is going to a multicultural society where the “traditions already exist” (1998, p. 13) and where the appropriations are within “the experience of [the] audiences and the cultural inheritance of [the] actors” (1998, p. 18). The plurality of a multicultural society provides richer soil, in Brown’s view, for intercultural innovation and this links to Latrell’s point that in many cases part of the sensibility of artists in a developing culture is to appropriate from foreign sources as a means of stimulating innovation in their performances. As we will see later in this chapter, the arguments of both Latrell and Brown have relevance to the ni-Vanuatu context in which *Zero Balans* was developed.

**Adaptation as Bricolage**

While *Zero Balans* was framed, in many respects, as a conventional piece of theatre in a purpose-built theatre auditorium, with a clear (or, at least, architecturally clear!) demarcation between the actors who were lit stage and the audience who were sitting in the dark, the play was certainly not an exclusive experience for a cultural elite. In fact it was an event for absolutely everyone. This is despite the fact that the work borrows extensively from canonical Western theatre forms in which many audience members would not have been particularly well versed (except for their previous experiences of watching a WSB big play). Looking more closely at the largely Western conventions of narrative/character-based theatre that I saw being
used, it is clear that some borrowings were more conscious than others. It was also clear that Western forms were being appropriated with little regard for stylistic consistency and, instead, a healthy respect for local tastes.

At the most fundamental level, a possible model for the dramaturgy of Zero Balans is the famous medieval miracle play, *Everyman*, a form of popular entertainment based on Catholic doctrine and regularly performed by communities in late 15th/early 16th Century England. In *Everyman*, God sees that mankind has forgotten about him and that “[i]n worldly riches is all their mind” (Cawley, 1993, p. 200, Line 27). He sends Death down to an un-expecting Everyman, to give an account of his life and his good deeds. In both *Everyman* and in *Zero Balans*, the protagonist initially fails to give a satisfactory account of their life’s work, with friends and allies refusing to testify for them, but in the end each protagonist is saved: Everyman, through the intercession of Knowledge and Confession; Ezekiel, through the unexpected compassion of the one person who has suffered the most because of him, Lisa. When I suggested to Joanne Dorras, the writer of *Zero Balans*, that there were close parallels between the two plays, her response indicated that, while she had not consciously drawn on *Everyman*, it was not a far-fetched analogy on my part: “It may well have been a direct steal. I have seen *Everyman*, and it’s amazing what you steal without you even knowing it” (Personal communication, May 11, 2011). There are, of course, many dissimilarities as well as commonalities between the two plays. For one thing, although the angel characters in *Zero Balans* may have connected with the Christian
faith of many ni-Vanuatu, for the scriptwriter their main purpose is as a device for episodic structuring. She explains:

I was trying to write the story chronologically and that really didn't work...so
I needed something that would – would act as a kind of way at looking at his life in this chopped up way...I wanted that sense of the risk, the question of who is responsible for this ghastly mess. (Personal communication, May 11, 2011)

In the play, the angels enable the narrative to move back and forth in time in order to concentrate on key public and personal episodes in Ezekiel's life so that they investigate whether he is to blame for his actions or not. As a result, this dramaturgical device enables dialectic commentary to take place in scenarios involving political corruption, the Wantok system, land rights, the displacement of communities, high unemployment and gender inequality. In certain episodes, for example, the angels freeze the action in order for Ezekiel to step out of the scene he is replaying and to debate with them over the his own actions and the actions of others. Here, one could easily argue for a Brechtian influence, with echoes of The Good Person of Szechwan in particular (albeit without Brecht's bitterly ironic take on the gods' failings). However, unlike the aesthetic programme that Brecht famously sets out in his writings on "Epic Theatre" the various elements of the mise en scène in Zero Balans are not treated as relatively autonomous strands within a montage-like

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46 The name for these two spiritual beings is not fixed: the script calls them the Chorus and the two actors alternated speaking each line, in rehearsals Walker called them the gods, the programme called them angels, and in her interview, Dorris said, "the gods or ... the angels, or whatever you want to call them in it" (Personal communication, May 11, 2011). To distinguish between the two angels, this thesis has labelled the characters Angel 1 and Angel 2. While the angels may connect primarily to the Christian faith, particularly through the symbolic wearing of all white, there are also certain kastom beliefs involving spirits who can control the forces of nature, i.e. thunder and lightning, just as the angels do in the play.
structure; rather, music, song, sound and lighting effects seamlessly integrate the episodes together in the same way as occurs in popular music theatre.

A similarly eclectic form of borrowing occurs with styles of acting. Comedy and slapstick, melodrama, other heightened forms of drama and pared-back realism all intentionally play alongside each other to produce a rollercoaster ride of emotions. As Dorras explains:

I love that mixture of laughter and sadness and I love that one minute that you can have people laughing at something quite silly and the next minute they're going huhhh [she loudly takes in a breath, I do too]. I like that about plays, I suppose that's what I try. (Personal communication, May 11, 2011)

Among the variations of comedy within the play, some of which were referred to in the previous chapter, there is one particular slapstick episode that epitomises the kind of physical and verbal comedy that the creators and audience thoroughly enjoy. It takes place on the first day of Ezekiel’s job as a Member of Parliament in his office. His desk stands in the middle of the stage, turned sideways with papers and a phone on it. His chair sits on the left and the visitors’ chair sits on the right. The scene begins with Ezekiel on his side of the desk preparing to leave for “wan impotan miting” (“one important meeting”) (Dorras, 2011, p. 16), when the Jif, Steven and Willie suddenly turn up and interrupt him. The Jif sits down on the visitor’s chair to talk about “career prospects” now that Ezekiel has made the big time: perhaps Steven can be a driva (driver), Willie a garen boe (garden boy) and the Jif, Ezekiel’s political sekretari (political secretary)? Indeed, the Jif starts to rifle through the

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47 This is one of the scenes where Ezekiel is in the past, showing the angels the pressure he felt from his Wantok.
paperwork on Ezekiel’s desk as he speaks. Ezekiel declines, setting off a fast-paced, five minute round-robin of competitive bargaining as the three men vie with one another to capture Ezekiel’s attention, trying to find some way to cash in on his new position and hold him to his political promises. The Jif begins each new appeal with “Hey big man, big man!” and the three talk quickly with large smiles and bright eyes, excitedly interrupting each other with each supplication and leaning over the desk on their feet to get close to Ezekiel. They also hold his chin, bang their hands on the desk, push each other out of the way, pull the visitor’s chair backwards when a person is on it and try to sit on the chair with someone already on it. Willie plays the guitar and propels the Jif off the chair with his rock star moves, all three pass the guitar around like a hot potato until it crashes to the ground and they stand on top of the chair yelling and waving to get the attention of Ezekiel. Of course, Ezekiel gives in; he gives a cheque each to Willie and Steven and promises the Jif that he will look for funds for the church (later acquiring them by illegal means). Just as Ezekiel finally gets all three men to the door, Elise parades in with her bright green and pink Mother Hubbard dress, straw bag and head scarf exclaiming with arms open wide, “Brotha blong mi! Brotha blong mi!” (“My brother! My brother!”) The three men scatter. Ezekiel sighs. She looks him up and down, comments on his flash suit and heads straight to the desk. Ezekiel sticks to the doorway. Elise declares she can be his secretary; she needs work to help Lisa get to USP\textsuperscript{48} and answers the phone upside down. Ezekiel remains at the door, insisting he needs to go to the very impotan miting. She carries on excitedly chatting and chatting and chatting. He finally gets her out with much protesting and collapses against the bamboo wall.

\textsuperscript{48} University of the South Pacific; a branch of the University is in Port Vila.
In like manner, woven through the play are moments in which melodramatic emotion takes over. At the end of the first act, after Ezekiel is unable to prove his innocence, Angel 1 leads him to his hospital bed. He lowers his head, contorts his face with a huge frown, howls and whimpers, and drags his feet. He continues to behave like this until snap!—they give him a second chance—his eyes brighten, his mouth smiles and he springs out of bed. In a similar vein, when the radio reports the suspension of Ezekiel and his misdeeds to the public at the fundraiser, the jif instantly changes from a happy go-lucky, eccentric leader into another man. In the kerfuffle, he angrily hobbles to the centre of the stage with his stick and strongly bangs it on the ground with force. He screams over the racket, “no touchem kava!” pointing to the kava on his right and “no touchem kaka!” as nobody can pay for the food. Coupled with the melodramatic acting are scenes of highly charged, larger-than-life physicality. Rita arrives in Lagun Saed to confront Lisa over her affair with Ezekiel; she yells “secretary!” charges towards her and lunges at her. The two scratch, slap and pull each other in a fight that soon has them grappling on the floor, attracting a crowd, and requiring Willie and a few other men to pull them apart.

As I watched the rehearsals, some of these acting choices struck me as exaggerated, so I asked Helen if she thought their acting in general was realistic or else deliberately “over the top”. She answered, “Well in plays we always have to over act it. It’s always loud and it’s always you know, out there” (Personal communication, May 10, 2011). Yet at the same time these melodramatic, highly charged scenes (and even the comedic moments) do connect to daily life experiences for the cast and audience, just as much as some other scenes that I will discuss below which utilised

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49 These words and actions are not in the script and were added in rehearsals.
a more pared-back realist style. For instance, when Helen and I discussed the way her character returns home to *Lagun Saed* drunk in the early hours of the morning and then fights with Rita, she declared:

“That's real, that happens...and fight scenes, that happens so.”

I interrupt, “Like on the floor?”

“Yes!”

“Even guy and girl?”

“Yes! ...Yes it happens...you should see fight scenes in real life, two women, two ni-Van women fight, ohhhh ooff! Dangerous man, they pick up bottles and stuff...Well ni-Vans are friendly, they're really friendly people, ummm...it's just that they're also people that are open.” (Personal communication, May 10, 2011)

When Helen describes ni-Vanuatu as also being “open” she means that they generally are not afraid to display their more negative feelings and opinions, both verbally and physically, in strong, direct ways. So for the actors, loud and over-the-top actions and interactions come from a place of experience and real emotion just as much as their pared-back realist acting does. In the final scene, for example, Ezekiel goes to the public gallery at parliament to stop the *Lagun Saed* land development deal and to stop the government from kicking the villagers off the land with nowhere to go. When Titus acts as Ezekiel in this scene, he jumps up and down, raises his arms, gesticulates wildly and shouts as loud as he can to get the attention of politicians, who fiercely yell back. After the character Ezekiel fails to stop the deal, Titus withdraws into silence and slowly walks with his head down to the centre of the stage, which represents *Lagun Saed*. In both actions, I observed tears falling from Titus’ eyes. This was an example of the most natural and unforced “emotion
memory” feeding into Titus’ acting: as a nineteen year old, together with the rest of his community, he experienced being kicked off land in Port Vila by the government with only 24 hours’ notice in the middle of the wet season.\textsuperscript{50} As Titus explained, when describing his acting process, this scene never failed to bring up memories of his community packing up all their belongings in the pouring rain and of his Aunty with her newborn baby and the old men with their walking sticks walking to their new home, an area of bush just outside of town (Personal communication, May 12, 2011). Although the other actors may not have personally experienced everything that occurs in the play, some place themselves into the situation of their character, as one male actor said to Robyn Archer: “I have to put myself into the part I am playing...it’s me” (2010, Episode 2), or find a model in their community for the character they play and observe how they react to particular issues and people (Helen, personal communication, May 10, 2011). But whatever their approach, even the ones who tended to “display” emotion in what Stanislavsky-trained theatre makers would call “indicating”, all of the actors were fully committed to portraying their roles in a truthful manner.\textsuperscript{51}

As mentioned earlier, interspersed between these heightened dramatic or comedic scenes were scenes of pared-back realism. These scenes were moments of pause and

\textsuperscript{50} The land was in the centre of town, opposite the Vanuatu Culture Centre and had originally been “owned” by an expatriate who allowed Titus’ community (originally from the island of Nguna) to settle on the land. With independence, according to Titus, the expatriate gave the land back to the government. The government later then gave the community 24 hours’ notice to evacuate the land. The chiefs and elders asked the government officials where they would go and they provided the chiefs and elders with two options in the bush for the community to re-settle on. Titus said that the first option was far away, too far away from town and had lots of mosquitoes, so the chiefs and elders chose the second option. The community put up tarpaulins and lived under them until the men cleared the bush and built their homes. Parliament House was then built on the original land they occupied (Personal communication, May 12, 2011).

\textsuperscript{51} In one of the later rehearsals, the director reminded the cast that each one of them had a different acting process and way of “getting into character”, and that they should respect this.
rest, in which poignant moments of reflection took place. In the first half of the play, just before one of the Lagun Saed boys calls Lisa down to the beach to meet Willie, Lisa and her cousin Sandra discuss her precarious position with Ezekiel and Willie. Lisa sits cross-legged in the front corner of stage right, with Sandra standing close behind her leaning against a bamboo wall. They talk quietly: Sandra gently asking questions, Lisa answering, pondering, feeling her way through which direction she should take. Lisa ends the discussion knowing she should leave Ezekiel and be with Willie; this hope however, turns to tragedy in the next scene (the rape). The moment of Ezekiel’s redemption similarly occurs in a pared-back way. After the commotion of Ezekiel being sacked by the Prime Minister on public radio, Ezekiel sits alone on the edge of the fundraising stage, hands on his temples, in shock and despair. All hope of getting someone to say he is wan gud fella man has vanished. Lisa walks up and sits beside him, gently putting her hand on his shoulder. They talk softly, and despite all the pain he has caused her, she tells him that he is still wan gud fella man. Such moments of pause and reflection involving pared-bared realism serve the purpose of revealing the inner intents and struggles of a character, not necessarily seen in the open, and bring a quality of quiet beauty to the play amongst the more active scenarios.

Altogether, Zero Balans is more an eclectic ransacking of many forms—a bricolage—than a direct appropriation of a single Western theatrical style, dramaturgy or genre. This is evidenced by the equal levels of enthusiasm of the company for Western films of vastly different genres: on our group bonding day, the actors were just as enthralled by Anthony Sher’s Primo as they were by Steve Martin’s Bowfinger which played straight afterwards. Regarding Hollywood actors, the WSB performers prefer
those who are able to play a large repertoire of characters. As Helen says, “They play a character in a movie and they’re totally different from the next one they play”—at the top of her list of current favourites, Helen places Helena Bonham Carter (Personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Behind the admiration that WSB members express for the skills of internationally-renowned professional actors, there is not so much awe as a considered effort to identify role models from whom craft skills might be learnt. WSB members recognise that the opportunities for training in a ni-Vanuatu context are limited and that, for the most part, it is a case of learning on the job, drawing from what is accessible through film and TV but also from the tips passed on by more experienced colleagues. There is a seriousness of purpose among the WSB actors\(^{52}\) and a desire to place their work in relation to elite international companies and artists.\(^{53}\) At the same time, WSB actors have confidence in their existing abilities, recognising the highly expressive nature of everyday social performances in Vanuatu anyway. As Peter Walker explains (in an interview with the renowned Australian theatre-maker, Robyn Archer, for ABC TV), “We do a little formal training. But I think it is a style that seems to come fairly easily to the actors” (Archer, 2010, episode 2). The impressions I formed about the high standard of acting in Zero Balans are comparable to those of Archer: “I find the level of skill and craft you have as actors incredible. I mean you really are telling great stories and telling them in a marvellous way. It’s good, really good acting. I am very impressed” (2010, Episode 2).

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\(^{52}\) Titus was so serious about his role as an actor that he would go home each night after rehearsals, buy a little kava and go over in his mind all that had happened in the day, his roles (as both Ezekiel and an angel) and how he could play them better. He also said that if you opened his veins, you would find “actor” written in his blood (Personal communication, May 12, 2011).  

\(^{53}\) References were made in rehearsals to sources such as The King’s Speech, The Wire, Ian McKellan and Waiting for Godot, and a Scandinavian television series for its use of sound.
Grassroots Professionalism

There is, then, a complex complementarity in WSB’s work: on the one hand, a conscious aspiration towards the very highest technical standards exhibited by professionals working in theatre, film and TV anywhere in the world today; on the other hand, recognition of the limited resources available and faith that Melanesian habits of communality and learning by apprenticeship will see them through. This complementarity translates into a sensibility I like to call “grassroots professionalism”. Above all else, this sensibility allows the company to adapt quickly to circumstances, to find a workaround solution or at least to know when it is necessary to bring in outside expertise on the company’s own terms. For instance, the lighting equipment in the theatre had been left in a disastrous state by a travelling theatre group and three days of patient, collaborative effort outside rehearsals, by a dedicated group of WSB actors and myself, were not enough to turn a spaghetti-like mess of randomly patched cables and scattered gel-frames into a quality lighting design. Having kept a small amount of funds aside in the budget for just such a contingency, Walker was able to call on a professional lighting technician who flew in from Queensland, Australia, and spent a long weekend coming up with a lighting design for the show and, most importantly, mentoring members of WSB throughout this process.

WSB members rarely exhibit stress or disappointment whenever circumstances beyond their control reveal a gap between the elite professional environment against which the company ranks itself and the realities of working in a developing country. Performances are quite often disturbed by power outages or rumbling earth tremors and it is remarkable to watch the actors carry on at such times without so
much as a blink of an eye. One particular power outage coincided with the episode in the play where we see the villagers celebrating Ezekiel’s election to Parliament. The audience could barely see anything and, worse, this scene is meant to conclude with spectacular thunder and lightning effects as Ezekiel is transported back into the present in order to dialogue with the “angels”! Undeterred, a couple of the actors produced some extraordinary “manual thunder” effects by crashing metal props together, backed up by the *jif* hammering his stick on the floor, and the audience was left in no doubt as to what was taking place.

I observed similar practices of making-do and getting-by at other events I attended in Port Vila. This included the UBO World Super Middle Weight Title fight between World Champion Kali Jacobus from Vanuatu and Rocky Junior from Brazil at the Ex-FOL Stadium. The event, which was organised by my host father, followed all the ceremonies involved in a large, title challenge. It had a VIP area serving canapés, three levels of seating, processions, flag waving, national anthems sung by national icon Vanessa Quai, and even Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) officers stationed around the ring and stadium. Yet, the ropes around the boxing ring were so loose that the Brazilian fighter flipped over backwards onto the hard floor three times during the bout. The Brazilian camp accused the ni-Vanuatu organisers of sabotage after the match but the reality was the ropes were the only ones available in Port Vila. My host father was initially embarrassed but he brushed off the criticism because his team had done the best that they could do with the available resources and they had handed the situation with calm and no stress. As with some performances of *Zero Balans*, there was a power outage during the boxing match. This time, it was pitch black – I could not see my hands in front of me. Nevertheless, the crowd remained
quiet and still, waiting calmly for approximately three minutes later until the fluorescent lights flickered back on. Unfortunately, a number of the political dignitaries and other VIPs, together with the VPF, had slipped away in the dark, but they soon returned and the match carried on as if nothing untoward had taken place.

Clearly, then, some aspects of what I am calling “grassroots professionalism” reflect the long-time experience and everyday reality of living in a developing Pacific nation, which runs on low material resources. However, other instances that I observed during the making of *Zero Balans* suggest that WSB has also developed a particular way of dealing with the challenges of artistic innovation and growth. The sensibility of grassroots professionalism is outward looking. It encourages exploration of foreign forms and collaboration with outside professionals. Yet, it does so by trial and error, not wholesale co–option, and with a healthy respect for indigenous capacities. Furthermore, if ever there is a contradiction between the logic of an imported cultural practice and the conventions of Melanesian culture, it is *kastom* that will win out.

A compelling example of this came late in the rehearsal process. Towards the end of a run-through, during the climactic fundraiser scene, Abu suddenly appeared on stage even though his character was already dead (indeed, there is a large scene in the first half of the play that centres on his funeral!). After this run-through, following a notes session, a number of the WSB actors took it upon themselves to tell Abu why his character should not be seen on stage during the fundraiser scene. Jimmy urgently explained why the given circumstances of the scene and the narrative logic of the whole play could be undermined by Abu’s presence but Abu was having none of it. The fundraiser scene is a significant ensemble scene and it is
only right and proper that the company's real-life Abu—regardless of what has happened earlier to the fictional Abu—should be there. One by one, the other WSB actors yielded to Abu's quiet determination. Out of respect for the grandfather of the company, they agreed to let him do his own thing. Thus, in every performance, Abu would bring his own chair onto the stage, watch the main action, eat the food and join the other villagers in criticising Ezekiel. As director, Walker seemed to understand very quickly that there was no need to intervene in this debate, nor did I ever hear an audience member express any surprise at Abu’s choice.

**The Fertile Ground of Kastom**

Up until this point, I have been stressing the extent to which *Zero Balans* borrowed, often very consciously, from a more or less canonical, albeit eclectic mix of Western genre conventions. Clearly, as the incident above involving Abu suggests, this is only half the picture at best. We still need to consider what it is about ni-Vanuatu culture that makes the performers generally open to such borrowing and why certain borrowings are more likely than others. Part of the answer to these questions, of course, lies with the effects of globalisation. However, it is also important to emphasise that many of the key characteristics coming through in WSB's performances do also have a strong resonance with *kastom* forms that have been noted in the ethnographic literature on Vanuatu since at least the late 19th century. In this section, I want to highlight some of these resonances, in regard to traditional uses of oratory, humour and song, before turning, in the next section, to some more contemporary influences. Nevertheless, it also needs to be acknowledged that the distinction I am making between “traditional” and “contemporary” is far from clear-cut (a point on which I will elaborate below).
The pre-eminent ethnographer of kastom performances, as encountered by non-indigenous observers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is the Swiss anthropologist Felix Speiser who worked in the (then) New Hebrides from 1910 to 1912. His *Ethnology of Vanuatu* offers extensive first-hand descriptions and documentation of kastom practices from across the archipelago, as well as drawing on observations that Speiser found in the letters of missionaries from 1891 to 1914. On the subject of public oratory, Speiser observes that it was a highly prized skill, particularly in the northern islands, that one could encounter on a daily basis:

> There are well known orators whom it is accounted a treat to hear, and there are actual speakers who represent the village on all public occasions. Usually these speakers pace hastily up and down the square round which the audience is seated, gesticulating widely and bringing out their words in jerks.

(1991, p. 380)

Highly ranked men in the graded leadership system of the northern islands had their own orator, who would debate for them and provide entertainment at their feasts with clever speeches. Listeners knew the difference between a good speech and a bad one, with humour being a key distinguishing feature. As Speiser explains, “A great deal of importance is attached to humour, the speaker tries to make his

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54 Christian Kaufmann writes that “[t]he ethnography of Vanuatu owe[s] much to” Felix Speiser (1996, p. 305). Speiser wrote his 1923 publication in German. According to the Hon. Iolu Abil (the then Minister for Home Affairs, who was also responsible for culture) in 1980, “the Curator of the National Museum of [the] Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Mr. Kirk Huffman, visited the Swiss Ambassador in Canberra, Australia... carrying with him a request from [the] Prime Minister, Father Walter Hayde Lini, asking if the Swiss Government could fund a translation of the work in the year of [their] independence.... the amount of ethnographic and photographic material he collected [was] of great value to [the] new nation [despite its lack of depth and eurocentric comments in some places]” (Abil, 1989 in Speiser, 1991, p. vii).
audience laugh, which does not seem to be difficult, and he who can provoke the
greatest merriment, is the best speaker” (1991, p. 380).

Humour also played a role in dances that were held at graded feasts in the northern
islands and during harvest festivals in the southern islands. Reverend William Gunn
explains that in Futuna (a small, southern island adjacent to Tanna) a dance to be
presented for guests would require weeks of private practice (cited in Speiser, 1991,
p. 383). Across the islands, dances would generally be based on real events with
costumes and masks, which represented specific characters, for instance “whoever
portrayed a fish [had a] fish [on their head]” (Speiser, 1991, p. 383). One dance
performance observed in the early 20th century in Vao (a tiny island off Malekula)
involved dancers mimicking drunken labour recruiters getting together on the beach
(Speiser, 1991, p. 383), a clear indication of the capacity for at least some innovation
and social critique within “traditional” practices.

The dances described in the ethnographic literature would always be accompanied
by a song, with drums and panpipes setting the rhythm. Speiser and missionary
observers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries paint an overall picture of the
role of songs and song makers of the time. Song makers are referred to as the poets
or poetesses of their society and Speiser et al. suggest that there would have been at
least one song maker for every substantial village, upon whose talents the village
379) observes that poetry and song were never separated, although music could be
played on its own. Songs could be sung solo, in a group or alternating between the
two, and new dance songs would be written with each new season. The inspiration
for such songs, particularly in Tanna and Futuna, came from the gods. Agnes Watt,
who lived on Tanna with her Presbyterian missionary husband writes, “Each new season....One of their song-compilers retires into the bush and meets the gods of song, from whom he receives the new dance music for the forthcoming performance” (cited in Speiser, 1991 p. 380). Yet, at the same time, new songs and dances could come from assimilating forms from other villages.

Chapter Three referred briefly to how the inter- and intra-island networks of trade, marriage and matrilineal lineages influenced the borrowing, adapting and exchange of cultural forms. Speiser elaborates on this point:

> The songs are regarded as the poet's private property; anyone wishing to sing them must buy the right from the author. Certain songs, which are usually associated with dances, migrate from island to island and in some places a real business is done in these commodities. (1991, p. 380)

In particular, he discusses the Ambrymese who specifically travelled to Southern Malekula and paid to learn new songs and dances which they could import back to their home island (1991, p. 380). Huffman, confirms this by giving details of “Southeast Malakulan traders, with partners, intermediaries, groups or men acting individually...funnel[ing] trade items, pigs, rituals, song, dance, art styles, and magic along their routes, and so into western Ambrym (and vice versa)” (1991, p. 189). The striking similarities between what Speiser and Huffman describe and what we know of cultural trade systems like the Trobriand Islanders kula ring, as described by Malinowski, serves as a reminder that one of the ways of keeping kastom strong has traditionally been to open it up to trade.
The Tree and the Canoe

At first glance, then, the ethnographic literature seems to support the notion that it could be appropriate to co-opt kastom practices into TfD work and to consider this merely a renewal of traditional attitudes towards cultural exchange and innovation. To some extent, this is true. Indeed, WSB have brought kastom into some of their big plays, including their first big play called Old Stories, which was performed at the local Chief’s Nakamal and details some of the history of Vanuatu. However, the situation today is also very different for the cultural context described by Speiser, Huffman and other ethnographers. Ni-Vanuatu are very conscious of the ways in which knowledge of kastom practices has declined due to the experience of colonisation. Hence, over the past forty years or so (but particularly since independence) ni-Vanuatu have generally been more concerned with reviving and preserving long-held artistic and performative kastom practices, rather than treating them as cultural goods to be readily exchanged or updated.

Led by the Vanuatu Culture Centre (VCC), one of the country’s main endeavours has been to record ritual and cultural practices for conservation, promotion and education. Out-of-context kastom performances have thus tended to be limited to festivals and for tourism as a way of celebrating and bringing awareness of the unique cultures within the country. Such recovery of kastom echoes other Pacific Islands from the 1960s and 1970s in their own independence movements to preserve their distinctive cultural identities, to distinguish themselves from their (former) colonisers and to form a resistance against the new wave of globalisation (see Gaskell [2009] on this trajectory within the Festival of Pacific Arts).
To return to the Melanesian metaphor of the tree and the canoe, there has been a conscious effort to restrengthen the tree through *kastom* preservation which has then provided the freedom for Vanuatu cultural makers to intentionally explore, and discover foreign cultural forms and appropriate what they want back into their own culture. Just as the Ambrymese travelled to southern Malekula for new songs and dances before they were defined as one country, contemporary ni-Vanuatu artists are borrowing forms but now mostly with an eye to practices that won’t be confused with *kastom*. So we are seeing a variation on the cultural ecology and practice which early anthropologists, Alfred Kort Haddon and Speiser, and later, Huffman and Kaufmann, trace back to the diverse Austronesian heritage of people from different parts of the archipelago. Nonetheless, like their ancestors, contemporary ni-Vanuatu are showing themselves capable of “transforming in an original way even those inspirations [they] may have received from the outside” (Kaufmann 1996, p. 17; see also Huffman 1996). *Zero Balans* fits in with this wider pattern of cultural innovation that tries not to interfere with the continuation of *kastom* and which one can see not just in theatre but also in the contemporary visual art and music scenes in Vanuatu, most notably in Port Vila.

In his article, “After Appropriation”, Craig Latrell offers another useful perspective from which to interpret the kind of cross-cultural borrowings taking place in Vanuatu today. Latrell found that for the Indonesian context that he was studying, local cultural workers often prefer to co-opt elements of foreign performance genres, rather than experiment too audaciously within indigenous forms, precisely because the perceived foreignness of the former allows an artist to do risky things. Thus, Latrell argues, from the 1950s until today, Indonesian actors and audiences have
effectively reinterpreted the conventions of naturalism to which they were introduced through colonial theatre to produce a distinctively local style of realist drama: to outsiders, this may look like melodrama but, to local audiences, observing the work against the backdrop of classical forms like wayang kulit, it is realistic. This appropriation of a Western form allows for particular types of risk-taking because, as Latrell explains, it fosters an “open expression of emotion [that would be] frowned open in many parts of Indonesia (particularly in Java)” (2000, p. 51). I believe that something similar to what Latrell describes is happening in contemporary ni-Vanuatu culture. However, as I noted earlier, even though kastom may have originated in the past, it is also “present”, “alive” and itself contemporary. For example, “traditional” artists regard the kastom artefacts they are producing today as having the same currency as new works with new materials and therefore are not happy with the restrictions the art world places on the word “contemporary” (Geismar, 2004, p. 47). Hence, while I have continued with the words traditional and contemporary to avoid confusion, it is perhaps better to differentiate the two processes by considering them as either a continuation or an innovation, with a reminder that the borrowing of foreign materials often acts as the stimulant for the innovation.

The contemporary art scene is a somewhat recent development in Vanuatu, again stimulated by independence. Regenvanu writes that one of the common dialogues during the 1980s was centred on searching for “ideas of self-reliance through strength and unity” (1996, p. 316) and this spurred contemporary artists to join together to form associations and create exhibitions. These contemporary artists are marked by their preference for working with foreign materials. One association, the
Nawita (Octopus) Association of artists, which formed in 1989 in Port Vila, primarily distinguishes itself by casting-off, in the words of Heidy Geismar, "the materiality of kastom in favour of non-indigenous artistic media such as watercolour, acrylic paint, and tapestry" (2004, p. 47). The use of foreign materials has thus become the tool for artists to investigate, explore and comment on complex and oppositional narratives woven through the past and present and to bring into being new ideas about their culture. Geismar further writes, “In this way categories considered by commentators to be non-indigenous such as ‘art’ are, in Vanuatu, prime manifestations for the production and manifestation of indigenousness” (2004, p. 45). One provocative example of this approach includes a 2001 exhibition in Port Vila by the Naino Association of artists. The group of artists re-created, in content and materials, paintings of Erromango incidents published by the London Missionary Society, including the martyrdom of missionary George Gordon. The artists then added in extra details, such as beams of light and painted barkcloth (a material made by the indigenous people of Erromango pre-contact), to highlight the complexity of the incidents and create fresh and provoking meanings to them, such as indicating that the history of Gordon and his death was far too idealised by the Missionary Society.

**Zero Balans and its Multiple Musical Appropriations**

In contrast to the art scene, the contemporary music scene has had a much longer history of appropriating foreign musical formats. As Philip Hayward notes, “Although there are a number of continuing traditional (kastom) music practices in Vanuatu (such as log idiophone percussion in Ambrym and Malekula) these have not

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55 In a local language in Erromango this means “a beam or ray of light that shines through a hole, like a shaft through a bamboo woven wall of a house” (Geismar, 2004, p. 50).
been developed into pan-regional syncretic music forms or otherwise been recast as forms of local popular music” (2013, p. 163). Given the vital importance of music to the dramaturgical structure and performance aesthetics of Zero Balans, it is worth explaining these cultural developments in some detail.

Since the arrival of the missionaries, ni-Vanuatu have appropriated foreign music to re-shape their song traditions and form pan-regional styles. The most common appropriations began with hymns, followed by American popular music in the 1940s, African American gospel in the 1970s, Caribbean reggae from the late 1970s and now, amongst others, American hip-hop. Zero Balans contains five musical forms: a hymn, a string band, a solo acoustic song, reggae-hip-hop and atmospheric music involving live kastom and modern instruments and pre-recorded effects, which again all contribute toward the bricolage effect of the play.

The play opens with an original, a Capella hymn, sung in Bislama. The lights faintly rise to reveal the villagers of Lagun Saed standing equally spaced around the stage, arms at their sides and solemn faces looking forward. They rise into a close three-part harmony, singing of hope and how God is there for them. As they walk slowly toward the audience exit they continue to sing, the harmonies reverberate through the building as they go backstage and the drawn-out “Aaaaa-mmeennn” echoes through the bamboo stage walls as the actors in the following scenes take the narrative forward. In the rehearsals, the harmonies came easily to the actors and they did not need any instruction or direction. This plays into the well-worn myth that ni-Vanuatu have a “natural” talent for song but, in fact, unlike other Melanesian cultures, such as in Fiji, prior to colonial contact there appear to have been very few choral polyphonies within kastom song, or in the words of Peter Crowe, “few
traditional ‘harmonies’ where combining sonorities [were] musically regulated” (1996, p. 146). In other words, the ability to harmonise would have been learned largely through the introduction of hymns by the missionaries (Crowe, 1981 & Crowe, 1996).\(^{56}\)

Another popular music genre appropriated from Western music is the string band. In *Zero Balans*, villagers and the two musicians play string band music to celebrate the election victory of Ezekiel and to celebrate the first rain of the season. Vanuatu has two distinct styles of string band music: a specific style from Futuna, which includes glass bottles filled with different levels of water and a national pan-regional style, which the musicians of *Zero Balans* adhere to.\(^{57}\) String band music originated in WWII: US soldiers based in Port Vila and Santo introduced ni-Vanuatu to Western musical styles, popular US genres, and guitars, ukuleles and mandolins. Ni-Vanuatu initially assimilated versions of the Western music with standard rhythmic patterns on the guitar, ukulele and bush-bass,\(^{58}\) played in loose unison together. As the style developed it became incredibly popular, particularly across Efate in Vila, the northern end and in the small surrounding islands. In Titus’ home island of Nguna (off the North coast of Efate with a population of approximately 1,300 people), they have eight or nine string bands who play for fundraisers (Personal communication, May 12, 2011). Since the 1970s string bands have also become part of the tourism

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\(^{56}\) Gospel music is prevalent. Gospel soul-pop adapted from African American gospel in the 1970s is also popular and contemporary pop-rock Christian bands and worship groups are becoming influential, particularly in more Pentecostal-type churches. At a church outside of Vila in Teoma, I asked one of the singers where they got their songs from. She replied from their “sister” church in Malaysia or they wrote their own.

\(^{57}\) In a variation from poets going out into the bush to communicate with the gods, the new Fortuna string band songs are communicated from spirits to particular community members in their sleep (Fitzgerald & Hayward, 2009, p. 123).

\(^{58}\) The bush-bass is a single string instrument that protrudes on a diagonal from a wooden box. It makes a fat wood bass sound and the musician adjusts its pitch by moving the wooden neck that supports the string.
industry and are employed to greet arrivals at the International Airport, creating work for ni-Vanuatu. Nowadays, the appropriation has been completely absorbed into ni-Vanuatu culture and the string band music most often involves a male band that sings high-pitched individual melodies and close group harmonies. They accompany their singing with an up-tempo groove, usually in a major key, on guitar, ukulele, string bass and percussion. Fitzgerald and Hayward write that in the most common string band rhythm a ukulele introduces the song with “a short, strummed motif” and the rest of the instruments follow through with “a shuffled, up-tempo, two-beats-per-bar, ‘cut-common’ feel, referred to in Vanuatu as the ‘two step’ [tustep] in reference to the couple dance it frequently accompanies” (2009, p. 120).

In addition, the string and bass strike on the one and three, with the percussion backbeats on the two and four. In Zero Balans several string band songs take place, including at the election celebrations where the Jif gets up and shouts “Inaf blong toktok! Musik! Bae yumi tanis!” (“Enough talking! Music! Let’s dance!”) (Dorras, 2011, p. 10). At the back of the stage, Willie plays the ukulele, a village man plays the bush-bass, Samuel plays the guitar and Leo swaps between the shaker and dancing with a village girl. Everyone sings along to the upbeat song. Singles dance with their hands moving up and down and travel round the stage. Abu jogs everywhere. Couples hold hands with a good space between them and the men twirl the women about as they step side to side.

In the second half of the play, at the fundraiser, a song belonging to a different musical format brings out the aggression of young Willie. While practising an item for the fundraising concert, Willie breaks off from the group of men to sing, almost rap, at Lisa. He condemns her pride and declares that he will make her love him. He
glides back and forth on the edge of the fundraising stage, almost prowling, sliding his feet along the floor, slinking his arms and following through with his head. The music accompanying him is a hybrid of reggae and hip-hop. Leo sets the rhythm with the bongo drum and Samuel fills in the sharp strums on the guitar. Along with gospel soul-pop and string band music, Pacific pop-reggae is the most popular form of music in Port Vila. Hayward describes how the “regional style [was] inspired by Bob Marley’s recording and visit to the Pacific in 1979...[and ni-Vanuatu] modified [the] classic Jamaican rhythms to avoid the stresses on the second and fourth beats” (2009, p. 164). He writes that Vanuatu reggae also includes “MIDI-based accompaniments and pop-styled vocal harmonies” (2009, p. 164). Today, FM107, an Efate radio station, plays Pacific reggae, and ni-Vanuatu remain huge fans of Bunny Wailer (otherwise known as Bunny Livingston, an original member of The Wailers) and also of Ziggy and Ky-Mani Marley, the latter of whom performed in Port Vila in February 2011. The main style of music to come from the yut senta is also reggae. The two musicians for Zero Balans perform in reggae bands, which played at the Young Life fundraiser, and Leo has produced two reggae songs for national radio.

Willie’s song and dance differed slightly from the typical Pacific pop-reggae found in Vanuatu in two ways: the musicians performed live with no MIDI-based accompaniments and the performance exuded a more hip-hop feel with its almost spoken words and urban dance moves. Such a leaning towards hip-hop reflects the latest musical influence to hit Port Vila. At the yut senta, hip-hop is growing in popularity with troupes forming and weekly dance classes being offered. Youth take inspiration from You Tube videos and the young actresses and actors play a range of

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59 At the church in Teoma, the congregation clapped on the first and third beats as well.
rap and hip-hop tracks on their mobile phones, from *Black and Yellow* by rapper Wiz Khalifa to *I whip my hair back and forth* by Willow Smith.

In my interview with Dorras, she spoke self-deprecatingly of “bunging” a few songs into the play, because the audience “likes them” (Personal communication, May 11, 2011). However, the company do far more than this. Dorras and the company use the songs as dramaturgical devices to show the characters’ different points of view, especially in regards to relationships. Just after Lisa’s fight with Rita and before he initiates the dreadful episode at the beach, Willie sits on a bar stool in the middle of the stage with a guitar and sings of “*wan rabis drim*” (“a bad dream”) (Dorras, 2011, p. 24) he had, where a man stole Lisa away from him, took her to restaurants to drink wine and Willie was about to attack her with a knife before he woke up. He ends the song with, “I wake up in the morning and I don’t know whether my dream is actually true. You are lying beside me; I put out my hand and touch your face. But you keep going with him!” (Dorras, 2011, p. 25; my translation). The two musicians accompany him in the background: Samuel with a shaker and Leo with a bongo drum, and Lisa sits in front of him washing her clothes in a plastic tub. It is the only time we see the soft and vulnerable side of Willie and how devastated he is that Lisa has gone to be with Ezekiel, which in turn prevents him from becoming a one-dimensional character and expresses how complicated the situation is for both Willie and Lisa. Dorras says of the performance,

I don’t know about the song, but the way he sings it is just phenomenal I think…And it gives him actually much more a character…Yeah if he had sort of just come up to her and screamed at her everyone would have just laughed but because he sings that quite powerfully, very powerfully, it has a whole
different effect. So I think music can at times, it can, it can just create that atmosphere, that feeling, without having to put in a lot of words. (Personal communication, May 10, 2011)

This “feeling” carries through with the replaying of the song over the sound system as one of the village boys calls Lisa down to the beach to meet him.

Lastly, throughout the whole play the two musicians provide live, improvised music, and this is often synchronised with recorded sound effects. Unless needed in a scene, the two musicians sit inconspicuously in the two back corners of the stage on a plank of wood built into the bamboo walls. Samuel squats on the plank and puts his bongo drum underneath him between his thighs. Leo moves from his seat to sit on his bongo drum to play and sometimes he moves down to the edge of stage right. When he does not need his panpipe he sticks it in between the bamboo trunks. Through the play, the two musicians follow and accentuate the action of the actors and provide another layer of atmosphere to a scene. In the slapstick scenario of Ezekiel, the Jif, Steven, Willie and Elice, Samuel light heartedly finger plucks the guitar, repeating four ascending notes. They also begin their music towards the ends of certain scenes to smoothly transition into the next one and fill in any parts of the play where no action is occurring on stage. Furthermore, they provide theme music for the angels, integrating their instruments with pre-recorded sound effects.

A notable aspect of the soundscape provided by these musicians is that, for all the modern musical borrowings, three of the instruments they use have a well-established place in kastom practices as well. Leo plays a Jew’s harp, a bamboo flute
and a small panpipe. Speiser reports seeing the Jew’s harp being used in the early 20th century in Ambrym and Gaua where it consisted of a very simple thin board, usually made out of bamboo, which narrowed at both sides and held a peg at one end, a slit in the middle and “a string of rattan...strung taught over the curved board” (Speiser, 1996, p. 379). The modern metal harp that Leo plays was given to him by a visiting Frenchman and, while perhaps easier to play than the more traditional variety owned by a colleague of Leo’s, is still quite technically demanding as Jeremy Montagu explains:

[The] metal frame [has] two parallel arms which lie closely to each side...[and] a flexible steel tongue, which functions as a reed. One end of the reed is fixed rigidly to the back of the frame and the other is turned up in a right-angle so that it may be plucked with a finger;...the instrument is played with the frame against the teeth, [the breathe provides the sound] and as the reed is plucked the overtones of its sound are selected and amplified by movement of the tongue and alteration of the mouth capacity,...the sound of the reed provides a constant drone (2004, p. 179).

Anthropologists also suggest that the Austronesians could have brought over another instrument Leo played, the panpipe. Made out of bamboo, its pipes stopped at the bottom, a characteristic, according to Speiser, which belongs to the panpipes in Ambrym and eight other main islands across the archipelago (1996, p. 378). The musician told me his other wind instrument, a flute, was also from Ambrym: this

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60 Despite the (uncertainly-derived) name, the Jew’s harp most likely originated in South-East Asia and therefore, anthropologists speculate that the Austronesians would have brought the mouth instrument to Melanesia (Montagu, 2004, p. 179).

61 A member of the band Leo plays in has a Jew’s harp made from marrow bones, which is more common in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (Montagu, 2004, p. 179).
instrument is almost more like a clarinet and is played vertically. It is also made out of bamboo, has two finger holes at the bottom and is approximately 60cm in length.

In order to give an idea on how the instruments work with the sound effects, particularly in regards to the angels, let us turn towards the scene of Ezekiel’s heart attack and their arrival at his hospital bed. Ezekiel begins to make noises of pain, “oh oh oh”, he stumbles forward and holds his chest. Straightaway, a loud steady heartbeat plays over the sound system: thump, thump, thump, thump. Samuel quickly strums the ukulele; Leo trills away on the panpipe and an actor backstage creates an ambulance siren with the flute. (Sometimes, Leo played the long flute siren or both together.) Pre-recorded crashes of cymbals join in as the paramedics rush Ezekiel to hospital. They leave him and Ezekiel lies alone in the hospital bed. The music quietens; the panpipe slows down, the percussion drum emits three strong bangs at intervals and the shaker rattles after the third beat. A drone synth then emerges and the angels appear. This music accompanies the angels in tragic scenes, such as in the scenes around the rape of Lisa and when the angels lead Ezekiel to his hospital bed to die. The music also filters into scenes where Ezekiel fails to get people to profess he is *wan gudfala man* and we feel the presence of the angels without seeing them on stage. The quiet, soft, eerie music seeps into your skin, producing chills and causing arm hairs to rise, and the low, slow twangs of the Jew’s harp provide even more depth and resonance.

**On the Uses of Ceremony**

In the introduction to this chapter, I referred to the critique that John Russell Brown makes of what he regards as an unethical misappropriation of non-Western traditional forms by *auteur* directors like Brook and Mnouchkine. While I share the
reservations that Craig Latrell has expressed with regard to the terms within which Brown’s critique is framed, I want to return at this point to one very important argument that is worth retaining from Brown’s work, to do with the uses of “ceremony” as a resource for communicating deep, culturally-specific meanings to an audience. Brown develops his understanding of ceremony with reference to the plays of Shakespeare, noting how modern directors from various Asian theatre cultures seem much more attuned to the significance of certain formal arrangements in these texts than contemporary English-speaking directors often are. Given that these often wordless formalities would have spoken volumes to Shakespeare’s original Elizabethan audiences, Brown sees this as a great loss. His definition of ceremony is worth quoting at length since it meshes closely with the Geertzian notion of a “matrix of sensibility”, shared between artists and audiences, and it provides a clue as to where we might see this sensibility materialising in the details of a play’s mise en scène:

In one respect, Shakespeare’s England was very familiar with ritual and so was its theatre. In daily life, for all classes of people, the lesser rituals of ceremony were everywhere apparent. Personal interactions, in private as well as in public, were defined by ceremonies – that is, by the repetition of actions and forms of speech which have general rather than individual or personal meaning and acknowledge power or authority....[For instance, official] regulations laid down the kind and quantity of ornamentation proper to the dress of persons in each walk in society and anyone would be expected to stand aside, to “take the wall”, when a superior was approaching.

Such formalities, ceremonies, or little rituals would be duly represented as part of the imitation of life on the stage and send their
wordless messages as part of a play's meanings. At that time, these signs
could be decoded by anyone and needed no reinforcement (1999, p. 53).

As Brown goes on to explain through multiple examples, when a disturbance,
variation or hesitation occurred within a specific ceremony during a play, this would
wordlessly communicate to the audience that something was wrong or a distortion
of power has taken place (consider, for instance, in Richard II, the intensely
provocative nature of Henry Bolingbroke’s refusal to kneel before the king he
intends to depose).

In this section, I want to linger over the details of three key moments in Zero Balans
in order to show how, as Brown puts it, an audience “can sense undercurrents of
thought and feeling in the smallest deviation from expected behaviour” (Brown,
1999, p. 59). Through the uses of ceremony in these moments, WSB are able to
reveal the deeply political and culturally complex interactions occurring between the
Jif, Ezekiel, Willie, Lisa and (to a lesser degree) Elice. It is in these scenes, in
particular, that the makers of Zero Balans are tapping into a local, ni-Vanuatu matrix
of sensibility that gives the play great cultural and social relevance regardless of the
apparently Westernised forms in which it is presented.

The second scene of the play is set in the middle of a ten day funeral for Abu. It is late
in the afternoon and people are coming to Lagun Saed to pay their respects to the
deceased and his family. This is the scene where the audience is introduced to the
Lagun Saed village as they honour Abu, the grandfather and elder of the community
and where the audience is introduced to Ezekiel. The strong kastom practices of the
funeral are drawn out within this scene. Each movement is careful, considered and
slow. Silas sits quietly on a wooden bench in the centre of the stage with pandanus
mats laid out in front of him and Elice stands by his side to receive the guests. She holds a large square piece of patterned fabric, which she uses to cover her eyes as she cries. The villagers, one by one, appear from the audience entrance, carrying pandanus mats, white and purple fake flowers in clear plastic sheets and/or food packages wrapped in dried banana leaves in front of them. They walk towards Silas and Elice, in varying degrees of crying, wailing and sobbing—some with a hand over their forehead or eyes; one using his shirt to cover his face—and place their gifts onto the mats at Silas’ feet. Silas, who has a bad back, leans forward with his right hand on his lower back, grits his teeth, squints his eyes and stands up to receive each person. Elice matches the level of wailing and sobbing of the particular villager; if a villager is particularly upset, she wraps her arms around them and they wail loudly together. Meanwhile, in the background other villagers set up two foldable tables and a chair in the back stage left corner. They put a tin washing bowl with water, large tin pots and a kettle with steam rising from its spout on the tables and family-sized rice bags underneath. A group of women prepare food for everyone to eat: the Stage Manager cuts up a cabbage, Sandra shreds coconut on the chair with a coconut board (a wooden board with a handle and all curved edges), Lisa carries cups of tea on a tray for everyone and another female villager peels potatoes. The arrivals sit on the pandanus mats or stand mulling around. Everyone either does this silently or very quietly murmurs to another villager. One villager carries in a large, white bucket of kava, by threading a small plank of wood through its handle and carrying the plank over his left shoulder. He also holds a bucket of small, plastic bowls (called “shells” after the coconut shell from which kava is also drunk) in his right hand. He puts the kava and the kava shells in the front stage right corner (designated as the kava pit), dips a shell and hands it to the Jif, who sits in his honorary place on a
wooden bench beside the kava and kava bowls. The Jif wears a worn cap, shorts, a tattered half-open shirt and no shoes. He takes his cap off and he keeps his head bowed down, remaining subdued and contemplative, he receives the kava bowl with both hands, lifts it to his lips and drinks it, then passes it back to the villager, who shakes the last remnants out. In short, he is performing his social role as Jif of the village. Yet, during this part of funeral, the Jif also looks around him and then takes some tobacco and a strip of newspaper out of his shirt pocket and starts to roll a cigarette. Something is a little “off”. Audience members would often notice this, pointing to him and giggling. This impression is confirmed with the sound of a car approaching the village, a car door opening and closing and the car driving away.

Someone important is here. The Jif straight away puts his cigarette back in his shirt pocket as Ezekiel walks on stage through the audience entrance. Ezekiel wears a suit and tie, black business shoes, a gold chain and sunglasses resting on the top of his head. He carries a pandanus mat in front of him and he lowers his head and cries out loud. Elice begins to wail loudly as he approaches and place his gift on the mats.

Ezekiel cries, “Abu, Abu” and he and Elice hold each other as they continue to wail and sob. Elice directs him to the Jif and the Jif moves over on his bench so that Ezekiel can sit beside him; however, instead of retaining his sombre demeanour, a

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62 Kava is a drink, which comes from the roots of the pepper plant (*Piper methysticum*). In Port Vila, kava is used for ritualised purposes in ceremonies and meetings and for recreational purposes at urban nakamals (meeting houses), fundraisers and gatherings/parties at home. The drink looks and tastes like dirty water. The root has sedative and anaesthetic properties and I found it numbs the tongue. Entry to the nakamal is often restricted to only men, although the urban nakamals or kava bars are open to both genders, with usually only expatriate and less-conservative ni-Vanuatu women attending. Urban nakamals are dark, quiet and peaceful. One can buy or drink a “50” (50ml for 50vatu) or a “100” (100ml for 100vatu) shell of kava. The shell is commonly made out of a coconut husk cut in half (although in the play and several times at people’s homes, small plastic bowls were also used, and at the Young Life fundraiser, WSB used plastic cups). The drinking of kava requires a certain basic ceremony: the attendant dips the shell into a large bowl or bucket of kava and gives it to the drinker. The drinker quietly moves away to the edge of the “pit”, turns their back to everyone, drinks all the kava in one go, shakes the shell out and spits onto the ground.
wide smile starts to form on the Jif’s lips. A villager hands both leaders a kava shell, they stand up, walk forward a couple steps, lean forward, drink together (the Jif sticks out his butt to do so, garnering further giggles from the audience) and step back. The villager collects the shells from them and they sit down. The Jif immediately sidles along the bench to lean against Ezekiel and says, “Hey big man, big man”. While everyone else continues to perform their designated role at this funeral (even Silas with a bad back), the Jif becomes progressively more interested in details of the cosmopolitan life that Ezekiel now leads, and less concerned with his role within the funeral ceremony. Ezekiel takes off his sunglasses and gives them to the Jif, who beams with delight and pleasure. The Jif then asks to have a meeting with Ezekiel, they negotiate a time and Ezekiel keeps extending it to the following week for he is wan bisa man (a busy man), in other words, the Jif and Lagun Saed are not of high priority or concern to him. When Ezekiel’s mobile phone rings and he answers the call, the Jif looks on in glee, pointing to the phone and saying to a nearby villager, “Oh mobile phone, mobile phone!” All the other villagers look up and watch Ezekiel as he speaks on the phone to his wife. The audience knows who the big shot politician is, not only from his dress and his place of honour by the Jif but also because he has a mobile phone and can answer it during a funeral. They are further starting to see that the Jif will break ceremony and let Ezekiel break ceremony (by talking excitedly and praising Ezekiel’s mobile phone) in order to garner favour with this big man.

However, we do not know yet why he is doing this or the political implications involved. The play continues to provide hints as to the Jif’s character. In one of the play’s “flash backs”, to when Ezekiel wins his election, the Jif gives a short speech of
congratulations in the centre of the stage and then leads a prayer to “Papa god” (Dorras, 2011, p. 10) explaining to God (but, in reality, to Ezekiel) what the community needs help with. Everyone has their heads bowed and their eyes closed.

One of the needs the Jif mentions in his solemn prayer is that no one can afford to pay for electricity, so the children cannot do their homework at night and he cannot watch DVDs. The whole village opens their eyes and looks at him as this is not a statement that a village would want their Jif to say in a public prayer. This statement always produced laughs and giggles from the audience. So far these slight subversions of ceremony in the funeral and the election celebration are insinuating the Jif is playing a political game to get a better life for himself (money, possessions and watching DVDs) and supposedly for his community (work, education and electricity). This game includes being spineless in his manner of acceding to Ezekiel’s wishes and in keeping Willie and Lisa under control, while at the same time covering his actions with an atypical eccentric personality.

These attitudes are seen particularly in relation to the sexual assault of Lisa, perpetrated by Willie and his Lagun Saed male friends. After the incident, Elice is distraught and talks about going to the police. Ezekiel visits her and tells her not to, while placing a roll of cash into one of her hands. This small action implies that Ezekiel wants Elice is to take this horrific act to the Jif to sort it out the kastom way, as a conflict-resolution meeting is initiated by a party or a family member of a party giving their chief cash. What this action more deeply tells the audience is that Ezekiel is paying the Jif a handful of money to quietly sort out the incident so that it does not become public knowledge and be traced back to Ezekiel. More specifically, this

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63 Depending on the time of year, the sun normally sets between 5.18pm and 6.28pm.
means that the *Jif* needs to appease Willie so that he does not cause any trouble for Ezekiel. While the conflict-resolution meeting is never portrayed in the play, this approach can be seen when the *Jif* in a private meeting between Willie, Steven, Lisa, Elice, Sandra and Silas, lets Willie and Steven get away with a light warning for putting up posters around the village calling Lisa a prostitute. Lisa is incredibly angry with the *Jif* and is reprimanded by Elice for not respecting him.

By the time we have come to the climax of the show, the fundraiser⁶⁴ the political complexities of power and authority between Ezekiel, the *Jif*, Willie and Lisa are made even more apparent through further subversions of ceremony. The scene opens with the young men and women of *Lagun Saed* setting up the fundraising concert stage and the young men practising one of their items. This practice becomes a way for Willie to threaten Lisa through a reggae-hip-hop song and dance, with the support of his boys and the two musicians. The boys pretend to dance traditionally and then sing:

> You, you're too proud.
> You think you're really somebody, girl!
> When I meet you on the street
> You turn your back on me
> You treat me like I’m a piece of trash!
> You just want to grab a gun
> And shoot me right in the heart.

> You think you can kill me off that easily!
> But I’m still alive

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⁶⁴ *Lagun Saed* holds a fundraiser for Silas to get a back operation at the hospital. He was laid off from work and cannot afford the surgery.
You watch now what I’m going to do!

You won’t get away from me, girl!

I know how to take you

And make you like me

I know I’m the right man for you

You can’t say no to me!

Willie: You got that!

Lisa stands and looks at Willie. She turns around and walks away. Elice walks forward with the Chief and Silas. Silas, walks very slowly. The Chief helps him. (Dorras, 2011, pp. 38-39; italics added)

The group target their dancing at Lisa. She folds her arms and glares straight back at them. Sandra sits down to watch. Lisa walks past Sandra and the group. The music, dancing and singing stop. She stops. Willie roars and points to her: “Be tingting ino save kilim ded mi!” (“Think what you like, you can’t kill me off that easily!”) Lisa then moves towards the audience exit. The song starts up again. Willie jumps off the stage and follows, continuing his menacing, smooth moves, and breathes down her neck. Lisa leads him in a circle to the centre of the stage and, as the song ends, she whips around and glares into his face. The four boys and two musicians stop and stare.

Willie shouts “Yu Harem!” (“You hear it!”) For a few seconds they defiantly look at each other. At the same time, the Jif and Silas enter through the audience and walk towards them. Lisa quickly turns and runs past the two elders without even acknowledging them. The group attack against the solitary Lisa again exposes prevalent gender related issues, in which a woman resisting a man means she is too

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65 Translated from Bislama into English with the aid of Anne Cochrane, Dorothy Dewar and Paul Dwyer.
proud, rather than a woman of integrity and that the man, in return, may be violent
towards her as a way of dealing with the shame of her rejection. But in this case,
more importantly, it also provides a key moment for Lisa to publicly resist Willie for
the first time, even with no support from the community. Instead of following his
orders, she ignores him, leads him around in circles and confronts him with her
“whip around and glare”. In one of the rehearsals for the scene, Helen asked Walker
if she could slap him in the face at this point. Although, she would have loved to act
this out, there was no need to as the stare spoke volumes. Equally important, Lisa
avoids the Jif as she walks past; a brave decision, as to encounter one’s chief without
acknowledging him shows a clear sign of disrespect and no other character in the
play does this. In rehearsals Walker instructed everyone to acknowledge the Jif at all
times. Lisa’s small actions towards both men carry poignant messages in a ni-
Vanuatu setting: she asserts her independence and worth by not submitting to a man
who abused her and by not offering respect to a chief who failed, and continues to
fail, to protect her in order for his own personal gain. We have seen her resistance to
them in a more private manner mentioned earlier, but this is in a public setting. This,
we might say, is “feminism with Melanesian characteristics”. WSB could have easily
(and naively) taken the approach of a more liberal, humanist, feminist discourse—
the kind of contemporary Western attitude we often describe as wilful “girl
power”—but instead they have produced a sophisticated locally-relevant enactment
of feminism by creating moments that arcae understood by and appeal to the ni-
Vanuatu sensibility and their cultural codes. Furthermore, Lisa’s resistance to the Jif
and Willie make her (difficult) choice to forgive Ezekiel at the end of the scene even
more profound. The audiences’ reactions during this scene showed that they paid
attention to these moments: generally, each night the crowd roared with laughter at
the boys’ inability to dance traditionally and turned completely silent during the song and dance. Lisa’s “whip around and stare” produced gasps and her ignoring the Jif created whispers, before the audiences returned to their normal murmuring.

The last scene I want to consider here, the fundraising scene to which I have alluded on several previous occasions, further shows that despite the Jif’s efforts throughout the play, neither he nor any member of the community has had their life significantly improved by Ezekiel (or have not put the money he gave them to good use). In this scene, the Jif still wears his tattered shirt and no shoes and everyone else wears the same clothing as well. Again, like the funeral, in this scene there is a kava pit and a food station. In a ni-Vanuatu fundraiser, however, kava becomes a recreational drink in which the men pay for each shell and have as much as they can afford; likewise with the food. But no one in the village is drinking kava or eating food as no one can afford it. The Jif hands Silas to Elice and returns to his honourable wooden bench, again a villager hands him a small shell of kava, which he drinks while the rest of the men watch. Yet when Ezekiel later arrives, he gives Ezekiel his shell and joins the rest of the men in watching Ezekiel drink it—that is, the Jif continues to be spineless and hands over his power to Ezekiel in ceremony with the hope that the Member of Parliament will donate money to the fundraiser.

However, Ezekiel has not come to Lagun Saed for the fundraiser; he has come to find someone who will say he is wan gud fella man. He is so desperate for this that he foregoes all ceremony: he rushes onto the stage and runs to Elice, imploring her to swear that he is a good man. But she interrupts Ezekiel, trying to do the proper thing, and pushes him to sit down in a place of honour in the centre of the stage, with a prime view of the soon-to-be-held concert. The Jif notices that Ezekiel is here and
jumps up, provides the chair for Ezekiel to sit on and helps Elice push him down into the seat. They are both trying to implement the correct ceremony. They both leave Ezekiel, Elice to get food and the Jif to get the kava, when Ezekiel jumps up and follows Elice trying to explain that she needs to say he is good. The Jif sees that Ezekiel is giving Elice all the attention and he strides over, “Hey big man, big man” and guides him back to the kava pit to sit on his wooden bench and gives Ezekiel his shell with kava in it. All the men watch Ezekiel with the kava and Ezekiel realises that he is stuck and must drink the kava according to ceremony. The Jif then explains the purpose of the fundraiser to Ezekiel, who then realises if he makes a large donation there will be many who will say he is a good man. As soon as Ezekiel promises the VT100,000 (around AU$1,000), everyone shouts with glee. The Jif stands in the middle of the stage and prays for the food, then allows all the men to drink the kava (many spit sounds filter through the scene) and the women in the make-shift kitchen hand out plates of food to everyone. Except for Willie, who stands scowling at the back of the stage with his arms folded, knowing he cannot speak to or touch Ezekiel. However, as soon as the radio broadcasts news of Ezekiel’s sacking, the power structure completely changes. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Jif immediately turns from a happy go-lucky, eccentric jif into an angry and forceful leader who takes control and orders no one to eat or drink anymore. Willie moves straight from his position in the background and pushes Ezekiel against the backstage wall and begins to beat him up, joined by his friends. Ezekiel has lost all his power and he is now useless to the Jif.

These uses of ceremony, amongst others not mentioned, contributed to the company's portrayal of the many complexities involved within politics and gender
inequality. As a specific ni-Vanuatu cultural resource, these ceremonies helped the company to dispense with overly didactic theatrical techniques, such as dialogue to explain the state of the relationships between the four characters, which would have over-simplified their actions and distortions of power and authority to the audience. Through the uses of ceremony, one of the ideas that cut through most clearly in the play concerned the effects of political and community leaders becoming engrossed in their own power, possessions and pleasure, while the youth of their communities greatly suffer.

**Conclusion**

Overall, then, with the aim of creating a heightened theatrical experience and aesthetic engagement with the audience, the company has appropriated and syncretised a myriad of Western and contemporary ni-Vanuatu theatrical and musical forms to produce a form of theatre which is unique to WSB and to Vanuatu. On the one hand, these forms have been sufficiently adapted as to recall many characteristics of “traditional” ni-Vanuatu cultural practices. On the other hand, they remain sufficiently “foreign” as to allow WSB to mount a sometimes very direct critique of social and political realities in today’s Vanuatu. In this way, WSB’s work fits with a wider pattern of cultural renewal and innovation that we can trace across other artforms in the country, and which relates, ultimately, to the long-time Melanesian sensibility of the tree (providing cultural stability) and the canoe (enabling discovery and cultural exchange).
Chapter 6: Conclusion

As explained in the introduction, this thesis has responded to what could be called an aesthetic turn in applied theatre and theatre for development. Foregrounded, in particular, by Thompson’s conference paper on the theatre of beauty at the University of Exeter in 2005 (Ahmed, 2006), this turn developed in reaction to a narrow view of efficacy within the M&E and Impact Assessments of non-arts funding agencies, and their corresponding influence upon the literature and practice of applied theatre scholars and practitioners. In particular, the aesthetic turn addressed the lack of attention given to the artistry, craftsmanship and affective experience involved in performance. Thompson and others have argued the field was undervaluing on one of its most significant and influential features. To cite Jackson once more: “lose sight of the aesthetic and the capacity of such theatre to intervene is seriously diminished” (2007, pp. 27-28; italics in the original).

However, as detailed in Chapter Two, the legacy of Kant has proven problematic for scholars wanting to make a case for aesthetics to be given a greater role in applied theatre and TfD. Even though Kant’s aesthetic philosophy has not been completely discarded, the need for new, complementary theoretical perspectives has become clear. One such perspective engages with recent discourse on the workings of affect. While broadly in agreement with this perspective, rather than grounding my arguments in neurobiological theories of affect, as Shaughnessy has, this thesis has sought to make connections between the notion of affect and a Geertzian approach to talking about art as “a cultural system” (1976). This approach informed my ethnographic participant-observation of the rehearsals and performances for Zero
*Balans*, a “big play” produced by NGO Wan Smolbag Theatre in Port Vila, Vanuatu. At the heart of this ethnographic inquiry, I pursued three key questions to which I want to return briefly: where is an audience’s sensitivity to aesthetic forms generated in the first place? When theatre is resonant (as Jackson puts it), what are the other cultural practices with which it is resonating? When audiences want to participate, what are the forms of participation for which their culture has helped to prepare them?

In response to the first of these questions, the ethnographic material presented in the preceding two chapters clearly suggests that an audience’s sensitivity to aesthetic forms is not an innate, universal, disinterested quality or a skill gifted only to geniuses, professionals or, in the case of *Zero Balans*, “well-educated” theatre goers. Rather, an audience’s sensitivity is generated by, what Geertz calls a local, culturally-specific “matrix of sensibility” (1976, p. 1481). It is, above all, this sensibility that I have been trying to explicate, in particular to show how this sensibility is an embodied, practice through which audience members may be affectively engaged “at every level” (Thompson, 2009, p. 125; italics in the original).

This thesis has also argued that theatre is resonating with a whole range of other local cultural practices that also contribute to a ni-Vanuatu aesthetic sensibility. For while form and function play a part, it is more the feeling and ideas behind them that resonate with the rest of the local culture, and this is what Geertz identifies as the “secret” power of aesthetics (1976, p. 1475). In the case of *Zero Balans*, the play’s development and reception can be considered in the light of the long-held Melanesian metaphor of the tree and the canoe. That is to say, *Zero Balans* sits well with a cultural ecology in which both past and present “traditions” provide a strong
foundation for exploration, innovation and growth to take place on terms that ni-
Vanuatu are able to control. Within the art and music scenes in Port Vila this
comprises purposely appropriating foreign materials and forms in order to make
them indigenous and comment on the complexities of contemporary Vanuatu
society. For Zero Balans, kastom oratory, caricatures, music, song, dance and art and
the integration of these mediums in both rituals and daily life provided fertile
ground for innovation in the play to occur. Such innovation involved the adaption of
a plethora of Western formats, including dramaturgies and acting methods, and
combining them with a variety of other ni-Vanuatu appropriations, such as the string
band. Together with the utilisation of local instruments, props, costumes and
ceremony (as defined by Brown), this bricolage process of making the stage
indigenous went a long way to resonating with the community and even produced a
cry of “It’s us! It’s us on stage!” in response. This is particularly significant as, apart
from Love Patrol, the major source of the city’s dramatic entertainment derives from
Western and Asian television programmes, movies and DVDs. Moreover, all of these
processes enabled WSB to interrogate the intricacies of certain social and political
issues in in-depth and sophisticated ways, including the subversion of ceremony.
While TfD practitioners are right to be cautious over cultural appropriation between
Western and non-Western developing countries, WSB’s practices reveal that it is
necessary for their artistic progress. This supports Latrell’s argument that cultural
appropriation is far more complex than a victim-victimiser narrative would
represent. As Kerr advocates, WSB have drawn strength from the “multi-layered
performance techniques” (Kerr, 2009, p. 101) of kastom while, at the same time,
showing how appropriations from Western culture may themselves be one of these
multiple layers of the performance experience. Furthermore, WSB’s engagement
with *kastom*, Western and “contemporary” *ni-Vanuatu* forms is clearly a more complex process than simply taking aesthetic forms off the shelf, as it were, and using them in a crudely mechanistic way as a delivery system for development messages. The labour and artistry that goes into the making of these big plays reminds us that cultural forms—the “semiotic system” that constitutes an “aesthetic”, as Geertz puts it (1976, p.1478)—are not tools to represent abstract ideas about a society:

> [T]hey are ideationally connected to the society in which they are found, not mechanically. They are …primary documents, not illustrations of conceptions already in force, but conceptions themselves that seek—or for which people seek—a meaningful place in a repertoire of other documents, equally primary. (1976, p. 1478)

Hence, when an audience wants to participate in a TfD performance, it is all their forms of participation in life, both in the everyday and the sacred, that helps prepare them to participate. For a Port Vila audience, this ranges, certainly, from participation in other musical and performative practices to how they participate in their communal living arrangements through to their use of *sharem toktok* in meetings and their involvement in rituals, such as funerals. An audience will interact with and talk about aesthetic forms in the same way that they interact with and talk about other things; namely, according to their sensibility. Consequently, there is no guarantee that every audience watching a more-or-less conventional, pre-scripted, narrative will be a passive audience, (potentially) altered by top-down, one-way processes. In the case of *Zero Balans*, each audience became a more or less cohesive collective, as spectators constantly interacted with each other and the actors, greatly influencing the acting and the details of the production. Indeed, the interactions
occurring in the performances were not only centred on the circumstances of the characters or the issues portrayed but also on the way the audiences wanted to experience such circumstances and issues. This activity meant that the audiences were not mere consumers of the entertainment, as they went home to discuss the issues in a very public way via radio, the national newspaper and on social media. Hence, the visible, audible and tactile observations of affect occurring within the performances may well have been a form of “embodied meaning-making” (Wetherell, 2012, p.4) for the audiences, functioning as a stimulus for action, which can be linked to the very active audience responses in the wake of the shows.

It also bears repeating that this mobilisation of audience affect has been achieved without recourse to the forms of audience participation that are more commonly found in TfD practices inspired by models like playback and forum theatre. It is the dramaturgical structure of the play, the nature of the mise en scène and the design of the whole event which generates active participation in a “traditional” stage-auditorium relationship. As Gareth White (2015) has recently noted, current debates about the aesthetics of applied theatre and TfD would benefit from closer attention to the ways in which theatre-makers are exploring a diversity of approaches to audience participation as part of the overall dramaturgy and aesthetic of their work.

If there was one aspect of participation, however, that comes through clearly from the analysis of WSB’s work, it is the centrality of long-term, sustained relationship-building with the local community. So many practices of this company—the way they keep rehearsals open for anyone to come in and watch, the teambuilding outings, the practice of eating together, operating like a family and participating with other community initiatives and activities within and outside of the NGO—are
simply a reflection of WSB’s long-term commitment to the community of which they are a part. Their work is testament to the view of Rahnema that “human relationships”, rather than any preordained artistic programme, lie at the heart of participation (2009, p. 144). So many projects in the field of development, including TfD projects, however well-intentioned, are compromised by the sporadic, short-term nature of the intervention which is often dependent on “fly in, fly out” external facilitators. WSB, by contrast, has set down deep roots—and they have brought the funding bodies along with them.\footnote{At least for now; it is clear that the local AusAID and NZAid development officers remain enthusiastic supporters of WSB’s work but there are, of course, larger forces at play. The brittle eco-culture the NGO lies within means that while they tick all the boxes, they are still at the mercy of major powers in the Pacific who adjust their aid and development funding in accordance with national budgetary constraints. In addition to the Australian government’s foreign aid cuts in May and December of 2014 (which resulted in AusAID cutting their funding for \textit{Love Patrol}), rumours have been circulating in the Australian press of a further small cut in the upcoming 2015/16 budget announcement (Donald, 2015).} Although the work of Wan Smolbag Theatre Company still operates within the aid and development framework, for all intents and purposes they have effectively become the national theatre company of Vanuatu and have demonstrated that theatre, in and of itself, has a social function. As messy as the debates over the aesthetics and affective experience involved in applied theatre/TfD have been to date, ultimately this is where they lead: theatre (like education, health and welfare) is a social good (even when the theatre is not explicitly broadcasting education, health and welfare “messages”).

Taken together, the arguments of this thesis point towards a number of related implications. First, there is room for greater experimentation with “non-canonical” applied theatre and TfD forms. Second, greater use of ethnographic research methods could shed more light on how aesthetics and affect work in different cultures and settings. Third, not only should we be expanding our sense of what
constitutes participation in TfD performances; we should stretch this notion to cover the kinds of deep participation—developed over decades, not days—that enable meaningful community involvement in the making and reception of TfD performances.
Bibliography


Appendix

Zero Balans Synopsis

(The script, written by Joanne Dorras in Bislama, does not have Acts or Scenes; however, I have written them into the synopsis in order to give clarity to the action and indicate how the play was performed.)

Act 1

Scene 1: Lagun Saed

The Lagun Saed villagers open the play, singing a hymn at church on a darkened stage filled with smoke. As they exit into the audience, a young woman called Lisa walks onto the stage with Abu (the grandfather). They both carry torches. Abu hears the singing and wants to go sing with villagers, but Lisa tells him that they need to carry on and get home; they exit. Willie and Steven, two young men, hurry onto the stage, stick up posters which read “Lisa Solmit” (Lisa is a prostitute) around the village and leave. Lisa walks back on stage; she sees the men scurrying away and notices the posters. She cries for her Aunty Elice. Elice comes onto the stage with her husband Silas and one of Lisa’s cousins, Sandra. Elice sends Sandra to collect the Jif (chief). The Jif arrives and calls for Willie and Steven; he gives the two young men a strong warning and lets them go with no punishment. Lisa is furious with how the Jif handles the situation and Elice tells her off for being disrespectful to the Jif. The Jif and Silas leave, and Elice and Sandra start to tear the signs down. From backstage, Abu urgently calls for Lisa and she runs to him.
Scene 2: Abu’s Funeral in Lagun Saed

Abu has died and the settlement is in the middle of a ten day funeral for him. Guests arrive to pay their respects to Abu, including Ezekiel, a Member of Parliament for the area and a "big man". Silas sits on a wooden bench with a large pandanus mat in front of him and Elice stands beside him, they receive the guests together. Ezekiel lays a pandanus mat at Silas’ feet. The Jif invites Ezekiel to sit beside him on his bench and drink kava with him. The Jif also tries to organise a meeting with Ezekiel, but Ezekiel looks at his diary and keeps extending the date of the meeting because he is a busy and important man. Ezekiel’s wife, Rita, rings him on his mobile phone about an article in the newspaper, which reports of a politician who spent his time with two Thai women in a Bangkok hotel instead of attending a UN conference. Rita knows it was him. Ezekiel leaves the funeral straight away.

Scene 3: Ezekiel & Rita Fight

Ezekiel arrives home, Rita is incredibly upset as all her family and friends have seen the article as well. Ezekiel swears that the story in the newspaper is not true and that he is telling the truth. Rita does not believe him and presses him for more information. They fight—both verbally and physically—and Ezekiel tells Rita that she does not want him, only his money, and as she is his woman she should start respecting him. She has money and a good life; their children go to school overseas. She should be happy. Rita responds that most of his money now goes to another girl. She leaves him and says goodbye.

Ezekiel picks up the newspaper to read the article and experiences a heart attack. Two paramedics turn up with a hospital bed, put him on the bed and wheel him around the stage.
Scene 4: The Arrival of the Angels at the Hospital

Ezekiel lies in his bed in the middle of the stage, all alone. Two angels appear and one of them holds a large book, which contains the names of all the bad people in the world that they are investigating. The angels have seen Ezekiel’s terrible actions as a MP and husband, and therefore, reason that he should not be on this earth anymore. Ezekiel thinks he is in a dream and tries to wake up. Once he realises it is real, he makes all sorts of excuses, such as arguing that the newspaper article was not fair. He asks for one more chance to show he is good. They reply that he is just making the same sort of excuses everyone does in this position and do not believe him.

Ezekiel admits, yes, he has been bad, but it is because he works in politics and the pressure other politicians, members of his electorate and his family place upon him forces him to act dishonestly and make corrupt deals. This has changed him. A long time ago, when he first started as a politician, he believed in helping people and was in politics for the right reasons. He takes them back in time to when he was a candidate in his first election and won. The hospital bed turns into his campaign ute...

Scene 5: Election Day at Lagun Saed

Ezekiel stands on the ute and declares to the villagers of Lagun Saed that if he wins he will fight for free education, more development for the community, work for every man and woman, more kastom and culture in their society, greater access to clean water; to uphold Christian values, stop crime and install electricity. The radio announces he has won his electorate and the village celebrates. The Jif is excited for what Ezekiel can do for their community and leads the village in prayer to “Papa God” (which is more directed towards Ezekiel). He asks Papa God for more food and
kava, for the young people to have work and for electricity so that the children can study their homework at night (and he can watch DVDs). The village needs Ezekiel’s help to lift up their standard of living. The *Jif* calls for music and dance, the string band starts up and the villagers sing and dance in celebration that they will now have work, clean water and electricity. The *Jif* begins to talk of being Ezekiel’s political secretary.

Ezekiel then tells the angels of the pressure he was put under from the beginning, even from his wife...

**Scene 6: Ezekiel’s First Day**

Ezekiel takes the angels to his first day in parliament. Rita is helping him get ready at home. The angels watch in the background. Ezekiel and Rita are both excited; but, Ezekiel is a little worried because Derek (another politician) gave Ezekiel money for his campaign and he is concerned that Derek will use that against him and he will have to align with him on policies he does not believe in. Rita warns him to look out and be clever about it. She also begins to talk about what they can now do with Ezekiel’s pay, such as send the children overseas for schooling. The angels freeze Rita and talk to Ezekiel about what they are talking about. Ezekiel tries to tell them he was never interested in a particular ministry or interested in power and wealth. So he takes them to parliament.

**Scene 7: Government Negotiations**

The Prime Minister, John, is putting together his government and is plotting with his right hand man, Pierre. They have three positions left to negotiate on. They begin negotiating with Derek, who is aiming to get Ezekiel also into government, so that he has an ally. Derek negotiates for Ezekiel to be the Minister of Lands but the Prime
Minister gives Ezekiel the trade portfolio. The angels again interrogate Ezekiel on the political moves that have taken place and Ezekiel takes them into the next scenario of his past...

**Scene 8: Work and Finances Needed for the Lagun Saed Community**

The *jif*, Willie and Steven come into Ezekiel’s office, just as he needs to go to an important meeting. They have come to get jobs, which Ezekiel refuses to do, so they ask for money for various things, such as the church and the string band. Ezekiel gives Willie and Steven a cheque each and promises the *jif* that he will find VT500,000 (around AU$6,000) for the church. His sister, Elice then arrives and tries to become Ezekiel’s secretary to help send Lisa to the University of the South Pacific (USP).

Ezekiel tells the angels how much pressure the *jif* and the community put on him to provide money for them, which caused him to take illegal measures in exchange for extra money. He shows one instance...

**Scene 9: The Taxi Deal**

Ezekiel meets Derek in the back of a taxi to sign a document for a foreign business “friend” to start a company in Vanuatu in exchange for money. Ezekiel signs it because the *jif* wants VT500,000 and Rita is cranky with him because he’s got no money to pay their children’s overseas school fees. The angels stand behind in his office and start looking through his bank statements...

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67 VT = vatu; the national currency of Vanuatu.
Scene 10: Ezekiel’s Bank Statements

They find VT15,000-VT20,000 (around AU$180-$250) being spent at restaurants, on wine, champagne and on a necklace. Ezekiel is spending all his money on luxuries rather than his family. Ezekiel admits he had been seeing a young woman, a relative of his sister, Elice. Lisa appears side of stage, dancing. Ezekiel and the angels go back in time again.

Scene 11: The Beginning of Ezekiel and Lisa’s Relationship

It is the first rain of the season and the Lagun Saed villagers all come out onto the stage to dance and sing with the string band. Ezekiel and Lisa dance together and Ezekiel propositions her: he would like to get to know her more. She says he has a wife and children and she has a boyfriend called Willie who is playing in the string band. He asks if this boyfriend can give her a future, like he can. Willie does not have a regular job so of course he cannot. Lisa gives in.

The angels interrogate him for being with two women at the same time and seeking a relationship with Lisa: does he know what it says in the bible and in kastom? He argues back that he did a good thing for Lisa, remembering Elice had asked him for work to help Lisa; he gave Lisa a job as his secretary. Ezekiel and the angels time travel to Lisa’s first day as Ezekiel’s secretary.

Scene 12: Lisa’s First Day as Ezekiel’s Secretary

On Lisa’s first day as Ezekiel’s secretary, Ezekiel introduces her to the job, while rubbing her shoulders, holding her hand and flirting with her. Derek arrives in the

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68 While AU$180-$250 may not seem overly expensive, in Vanuatu, where the minimum wage is around AU$350 per month, these figures are large.
office to collect Ezekiel for a meeting and is immediately interested in Lisa, asking Ezekiel if she is family or a friend. The two men then head off to the meeting.

**Scene 13: Date at the Restaurant**

The front of the stage turns into a restaurant and the angels continue to watch Ezekiel from the back of the stage. Ezekiel takes Lisa to the restaurant and orders champagne. She feels like a princess in a storybook and Ezekiel tells her that he likes her. Lisa is still aware though that he is a married man and she does not want to spoil his marriage with Rita. Ezekiel then gives Lisa a necklace to stop her anxiety. She has never been given a necklace before. He has won her over again. She exits the stage. The angels walk over and join Ezekiel at the table in the restaurant. They begin to admonish Ezekiel for his behaviour with Lisa and Ezekiel tries to put the blame back on Lisa, but the angels will have none of it, they tell Ezekiel that it is pretty obvious he just wants to have a good time. They ask him: how do his actions affect both of the women in his life? The play moves into another past scenario.

**Scene 14: Rita and Lisa Fight**

Lisa arrives home to *Lagun Saed* very early in the morning, while it is still dark. She is drunk and yells for Elice, saying how much of a great time she has just had with Ezekiel, including sleeping in a large bed at a hotel. Elice gets out of bed, comes onto the stage and tells her to get inside. She cannot believe Lisa is sleeping with Ezekiel. Lisa says he is a man. Sandra comes out and tells her to please come inside, but Lisa refuses, she wants to smoke. The two relatives gasp. Suddenly, Rita turns up in *Lagun Saed* to confront Lisa. Ezekiel had rung Rita and admitted to her that he stayed in the hotel with his secretary. Rita tells Lisa to stop breaking up her family, she leans in to strangle Lisa, but Lisa fights back and they slap, hit and scratch each
other. The villagers come out and Steven calls the men to break up the fight. Willie pulls Lisa away, Rita walks out and the villagers go back inside their homes.

**Scene 15: Willie’s Solo Song**

The play continues to stay in the past. Willie sits on a high stool with a guitar and sings. He sings of a bad dream he had, where a man is taking Lisa away from him. She says that she loves Willie, but she keeps going away with this man. She lies beside Willie, but she keeps going away with this man. Then Willie realises that the dream is true.

**Scene 16: Politicians at the Casino**

In another scene from the past: the four politicians, minus the Prime Minister, are playing the pokies at a casino. Pierre hints to the group that the Prime Minister knows that one of his politicians is breaking the leadership code, i.e. sleeping with two women at the same time, and if that politician does not support all his policies he will reveal the politician’s crimes. Ezekiel’s mobile phone rings, he sees Lisa is calling so he does not answer. The politicians exit the casino.

**Scene 17: The Rape of Lisa**

At *Lagun Saed*, Lisa ends her call to Ezekiel. One of the village boys tells Lisa that Willie is looking for her and wants her to come down to the beach. Sandra comes over and talks to Lisa about her situation with Ezekiel and Willie. Lisa decides she should keep away from Ezekiel, but Willie probably hates her. Sandra thinks that Willie will forgive her, so Lisa decides to go down to the beach. She follows Willie’s voice, who is singing the same song from Scene 15. In the background, the angels and Ezekiel watch, Ezekiel yells and screams for Lisa to stop, to not trust Willie. But Lisa cannot hear him and the angels remind Ezekiel that he cannot do anything for this is
in the past and he has contributed to the event about to take place. Lisa walks down to the beach; she sees Willie and smiles, Willie smiles back. Suddenly a group of village men appear and form a circle around her. Willie towers menacingly over her. Lisa crouches down and wraps her arms around her, trying to protect herself. The men step forward...

Elice walks back and forth across the stage wailing. Ezekiel walks to her to comfort her. Elise says to him that she is going to go to the police; he tells her not too, that it will be no good for Lisa and gives her a roll of cash. (This implies that Elice should sort the sexual assault out with the jif and through kastom so that Ezekiel’s involvement with Lisa does not become public.)

This action of Ezekiel tips the angels over the edge. They tell Ezekiel that he put Lisa in danger; that he did nothing to help her afterwards and that he totally used her. The angels return him to the hospital and pronounce judgement upon him. Ezekiel wails and pleads and pleads for one more chance. They finally agree; if he can find one man or one woman who is willing, without coercion, to put their hand on a Bible and say he is a good man then he will get a chance to live. He has one day; 12 hours. They leave. Ezekiel is excited for this chance; he starts thinking of friends, colleagues, family...only ONE person has to say he is good! He jumps from his bed and leaves the stage.

*Interval*
Act 2

Scene 1: The Political Meeting on Lagun Saed

The Prime Minister, Pierre and Derek are in a meeting concerning the development of the country and are discussing foreign investment and the building of factories to provide work. The Prime Minister wants to sell the land Lagun Saed sits on to foreign interests who will develop the land. Ezekiel runs in and they think it is his ghost, as he is supposed to be dying in hospital. Ezekiel convinces them he is real and he is healthy. Ezekiel is not supportive of the contract because it means the government will have to kick the Lagun Saed villagers off the land, but realises he could use this to his advantage and says he will sign the deal only if they all put their hand on his Bible and say he is a good man. Just as the politicians are about to put their hands on the book, thunder crashes and lightning flashes all around them. It scares the politicians off from swearing that Ezekiel is a good man and Ezekiel runs out.

Scene 2: Ezekiel Looks for His Children

Ezekiel's next plan is to find his children who will definitely say he is a good man. But when he arrives, he cannot find them and different extended family members are shifting all his and Rita's furniture and belongings out of their home. Rita is moving out. Ezekiel asks where the children are and she says she has already sent them to Santo. Ezekiel starts to panic; he pleads with Rita to say he is a good man, she refuses, and so he chases Jenny and Morris (two family members) around to get them to say he is a good man. Jenny and Morris flee from him, so he decides to go to his side of the family and sets off to Lagun Saed.
Scene 3: The Fundraiser for Silas at Lagun Saed

Silas has been made redundant and now has no money for surgery to fix his back. The village puts on a fundraiser to pay for it. The young people set up a stage and decorate it with fake flowers and plants. The boys practise their item, a song and dance hip-hop-reggae number, which Willie leads. He uses the song and dance to threaten Lisa. She stands up to him and purposely ignores the Jif as he enters the stage with Silas. Ezekiel turns up amongst the activity. Elise and the Jif are so excited to see Ezekiel and both clamour for his attention. They want to give him a place of honour to watch the fundraiser. Ezekiel tries to get onto the topic of him being a good man, but the two of them are taking over the conversation as they fight over his attention. Elise wants him to eat her food. The Jif gives Ezekiel his kava. Then Ezekiel realises if he donates lots of money then at least one person will say he is a good man, so he tells the Jif that he will go to the ATM to get some money for them. The Jif is thrilled. Ezekiel runs to the ATM to get VT100,000 (around AU$1,180) only to find that his bank balance is zero: “zero balans!” he exclaims. So he runs back to the Jif and says that the ATM is not working but he will donate VT100,000 and give it to him soon. The Jif is ecstatic, everyone in the village now can eat the food and the men can drink the kava. Everyone is happy. But then the radio announces that Ezekiel is suspended from parliament because he broke the Leadership Code. Silas repeats the news to the village: Ezekiel has broken the leadership code because he slept with two women at the same time. Ezekiel tries to play it off and make excuses. The Jif instructs everyone to stop eating and drinking kava. The villagers are aghast at Ezekiel’s actions. Elice asks Ezekiel if he still is going to pay the money and he says no, Rita took all his money. Willie and Steven attack him and beat him. Ezekiel gets himself free and then warns them that the government will remove them from the
land in a month. They think he is lying again, except for Lisa, who listens to what he has to say and tries to come up with a solution to stop the resettlement. But everyone leaves him and Ezekiel wallows in despair. Then, despite all the pain he has caused her, Lisa comforts him and tells Ezekiel that he is a good man. The angels arrive and tell Ezekiel that he has been saved, so now he needs to change his ways and lead a good life. They leave. Instead of being thrilled, Ezekiel starts to panic because he realises that he no longer knows how to be good man and pleads to the sky for the angels’ help, but they are already off to another place to interrogate another bad man. (The name of the place changes each night and is used as a joke, for example, Canberra, where the Parliament of Australia resides.)

**Scene 4: Involuntary Resettlement**

Ezekiel tries to stop the land contract but is blocked by the Prime Minister and his government. The villagers pack up all their belongings and leave with nowhere to go. The development sign goes up and two security guards remove Ezekiel from *Lagun Saed.*