

# Review

## Work In Progress

Judged New Zealand's best magazine book review pages in the 2006 Montana Book Awards

### Dance Soldier Dance

By Sarah Lang

DANCER-CHOREOGRAPHER Maaka Pepene (left) is plainly not accustomed to sitting still. When he talks he dances with his arms, gesticulating so wildly you fear for the safety of your beverage.

Forty in December, Pepene has been dancing on stage for 14 years. He's starred in dozens of productions as a member of our top contemporary dance companies, including five years (1995-2000) with estimable all-male troupe Black Grace. Now a freelance dancer, for the past four years he's divided his time between Maori company Atamira Dance Collective and the mixed-ability troupe Touch Compass.

"Dance is my passion but I'm a bit of an elastic performer — I like trying all kinds of performing arts."

You may also have seen him dancing in Opera New Zealand works, boogieing in music videos (for the likes of Pitch Black and Che Fu), or swinging from a trapeze in May in Christchurch's "physical theatre" production *Maui*. In September in the dark at wild and wacky World of Wearable Art Awards shows in Wellington, Pepene and fellow principal dancers shimmied around the stage and descended from the ceiling with tiny flickering lights all over their bodies.

Now choreography beckons. "I can express myself more freely through dance than through any other form, but as a choreographer I can take charge of the story." While he's previously choreographed short stage and film pieces, the Auckland Maidment Theatre curtain is about to rise on his first full-length dance work, *Memoirs Of Active Service* (November 15-19). (He's not actually dancing in this one, having decided that he needs to be off-stage to see the "whole picture".)

Based on his Irish grandfather's World War II diary and his Maori uncle's tales of the Maori Battalion, *Memoirs* is a tale of three close comrades from a rural Maori community and the two women left at

KATE MACPHERSON

home. "In essence it's a love story: between men and women and between men and men as comrades." 1940s film images and photography mix with song and dance, linked by voiceover excerpts. "I'm hoping eventually this will be part of a quartet: the Maori Wars, World War I and then Vietnam."

THIS CONFIDENT STORYTELLER has come a long way from a shy boy growing up in Christchurch, where he moved, aged five, with his family from the tiny Maori settlement of Waiohau in the Ureweras. Back then te reo was his first language and he had to attend speech classes every afternoon for seven years. "I was the only Maori child at my primary school so I got teased — no one could pronounce my name."

The eldest of four, Pepene at eight saw his parents split (he now has 12 full and half siblings). With Mum and Dad's hands full, Pepene often stayed with his Pakeha mother's parents, spending many happy times with his beloved Irish grandfather, Charles "Paddy" Murphy.

"He didn't talk a lot about the war but after he died [in 1979] I stumbled upon his diary among his belongings. A lot of it's about how much he misses his wife and children. It made me think — one person who appreciates life is the man on the frontline."

Pepene's uniquely positioned to tell an army tale. At 19 he retraced his grandfather's army steps, joining the infantry as a rifleman and serving in Singapore, Australia and Malaysia. "I saw it as a chance to travel the world — and get out of a social environment full of drugs and alcohol."

Saving up his leave and his pay, he travelled through Asia and Europe and in 1989 organised a party of 40 soldiers to head to Anzac Cove, Turkey, for Anzac Day. "Tramping across the terrain that the Anzacs crossed blew me away."

After six years' service and disillusioned by the government slashing defence spending and opportunities, Pepene left the army in 1991 and returned to Christchurch. Spotting a poster for a six-month dance course at the local YMCA, he enrolled on impulse. "I'd always enjoyed dancing at clubs, around the lounge, and decided it'd be great to learn properly."

He proved a natural, moving from community classes to amateur dance companies until a career turning point in November 1993. In three days he opened three letters: one invited him to a Maori dancers convention; another proffered a contract to dance seasons in Auckland and at the 1994 Wellington International Arts Festival with Taiao Dance Theatre; the last accepted him into the Auckland Performing Arts School diploma course.

He managed to fit in all three and has been based in Auckland since graduating from the two-year diploma course in 1995, though it required juggling dance with odd jobs such as bartending and acting a few *Crimewatch* bad-guy cameos. Five years ago he began managing by vigilant budgeting to earn a fulltime living from dance. In a good year that's \$35,000, a slow year \$25,000. "It can be hard but I don't have to get up early and I'm doing what I love [with the support of partner and fellow dancer Justine Hohaia]. And I stay positive.

"What I picked up in the army is that attitude is everything. We used to have to do route marches, 15 kms in two hours carrying rifles and pack and sleeping bag. At first I thought it was about physical endurance but then I realised it was about mental endurance. Seeing your mates doing it and thinking, 'I can't let them down'. And that applies to dancing too."

Future plans include leading a dance workshop at December's national Maori performing arts wananga *Te Rea*; brainstorming a new Touch Compass work and playing lead role in the Atamira show *Ngai Tahu 32* which will tour England early next year. Later in 2007 he plans to tour *Memoirs* around New Zealand.

"I feel like I've lived five lives so far," he enthuses. "My early years in Waiohau, growing up in Christchurch, a teen hanging out on the street, the army and now dance. There's just so many exciting options." ■



## The Best Of New Zealand Books

By Warwick Roger

**Bright Star: Beatrice Hill Tinsley, Astronomer**  
Christine Cole Catley (Cape Catley, \$49.99)

In her author's note on page nine Christine Cole Catley makes her excuses. She is not, she states emphatically, a scientist. "I said 'no' when I was first asked to write this book, and for good reason. Beatrice Hill Tinsley is such a towering figure among astronomers that I thought that only another astronomer could do her story justice."

Beatrice Hill Tinsley was a professor of astronomy at Yale University when she died, aged 40, of melanoma in 1981. She came to New Zealand with her parents from England in 1946, the family settling in New Plymouth, where her father, an Anglican clergyman, served for a short time as mayor in the early 1950s. She attended New Plymouth Girls' High and Canterbury University, where she was a brilliant student. She married very young, as you did in those days. Husband Brian Tinsley was a serious physics student who won a teaching job at the University Of Texas in Dallas.

Things, however, soon began to go wrong for Beatrice. The