REVIEWS

John Kneubuhl, *Think of a Garden and Other Plays.* Talanoa Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. Pp. 220. US$39 cloth; $18.95 paperback.

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A FAIR AMOUNT HAS BEEN SAID about John Kneubuhl, the Samoan-American playwright, as a writer of singular talent, and less perhaps about the highly complex and sometimes volatile sensibility behind the work. During my long acquaintance with Kneubuhl—my father and he sang Rudy Vallee songs together as boys in the Samoa of the early 1930s—I found myself mostly keeping a safe distance from what seemed to be the kind of intellectual fire that can singe the unwary companion. Some kinds of mental brilliance give off warmth as well as light, and Kneubuhl's was the kind that could flame. Given the volcanic nature of South Pacific social history in the twentieth century—the profound ruptures and force-fed "gifts" of Western colonialism on Oceanic peoples and environments, it can certainly be said that John Kneubuhl was a man of his time.

In *Think of a Garden and Other Plays,* we are most fortunate to have in print this trilogy of Kneubuhl's mature dramatic work. Something striking about the writing here is a singular kind of synthesis between a suave, urbane, Noel Coward voice of 1940s Broadway, and that of the sly and raucous satirist of ancient Samoan theater. The hybrid voice—native son of Polynesia meets the eastern seaboard avant-garde, native sensibilities cross-pollinating with Western aesthetics of performance—Kneubuhl's is among the earliest Pacific literary voices in English to articulate the sheer distances

of culture and history being traced in his life path. But perhaps the most shining contribution of this collection is to showcase its fine storytelling, the craft of well-wrought narrative that underlies most literature of lasting value. And surely the finest thread that runs through the three plays is simply and delightfully their presentation of old-fashioned, crackling good stories.

Written between 1975 and 1991, each of the three plays explores themes of cultural identity, loss and redemption for Polynesians of mixed blood, and second thoughts. In a letter written the year before he died in 1992, Kneubuhl specifies that for purposes of thematic coherence, the three plays "despite their actual order of composition . . . must be presented, in print or on stage," in a particular order, with the last play, *Think of a Garden* (1991), going first in the trilogy; the first play, *Mele Kanikau* (1975), in the middle; and the second play written, *A Play, A Play* (1990), last. While the editors of this collection have dutifully honored the playwright's instructions in this regard, the writer of this review will honor another directive—that of the *fai fale aitu,* ancient Samoan comedian, a trickster or "contrary," and totally ignore the playwright's wishes, at least for the moment. For, by considering the plays in the order they were written, it is much more possible to trace a trajectory of development in Kneubuhl's poetics, as he worked through a number of aesthetic, thematic, and metaphysical questions in his writing over these culminating years of artistic fruition. When viewed chronologically, the plays take on a formal logic and evolution not readily apparent otherwise. Not only are they linked by similar themes—alienation and cultural loss among modern Polynesians—the plays also feature postmodern formal devices of parallel and intersecting story lines, as well as metaphysical reflections on the nature of theater itself and its play with reality.

In *Mele Kanikau* (anthem of lamentation, 1975), for example, we find at least three distinct layers of story, the first narrated by a character called "the author" who quickly co-opts the name John Kneubuhl for himself after a bit of fancy wordplay and metaphysical shtick. "Poets don't merely create; they, too, are created by their creations. They don't just write; they are themselves written. So, you see, I have as much right as he to say I am the . . . real author of this play. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, here and now I create him. And, in that creation, create myself. . . . Friends, dear friends, my name is John Kneubuhl. I am the author of the play. . . . As I've explained, I *am* the play." Following this self-reflexive introduction, we find that story line number 1 revolves around an actual woman the author character (Kneubuhl) knew as a child, a genteel daughter of the *haole* (foreign) elite who scandalously runs off to live with a Samoan man "of no education . . . an ignorant savage" in his "old tent in the foothills, away from everybody." Story line number 2

provides the actual plot of the play, in which Noa, a crusty, disheveled Hawaiian from the back country, rolls into town with Frances, his common-law wife, formerly of "a good *haole* family." This odd couple proceeds to stir up painful memories of lost love and betrayed friendship with their childhood friend Carl, a middle-class native who works as a travel agent and produces Hawaiiana "packages" for the tourist market. Story line number 3 features the performance of a supposedly legendary tale of a tragic love triangle in which the young chief/hero is jilted by his lover and his best friend, who run off together to a remote locale. In *Mele Kanikau,* these layers of story and theme continually speak to and across each other, weaving in and out of the text like the fibers of a pandanus mat.

Kneubuhl's recurring theme of cultural alienation and loss forms the knotted heart of the play. We follow the testy reunion of Noa, Frances, and Carl after all these years, to see what they will make of this second chance to make peace with their painful memories of youthful romance and betrayal. Noa and entourage have arrived at dress rehearsals for one of Carl's glossy tourist productions, a so-called Hawaiian pageant featuring ad copy "royalty" and fake flowers. Noa is a hard-drinking, acerbic *kumu hula* (hula teacher), imported from the sticks to save the day after the official pageant director unexpectedly decamps for the greener pastures of Las Vegas. Noa and his dance troupe are accomplished in all things Hawaiian, and their performance of traditional dance and chanting effectively unmasks the fake glitter and show biz emptiness of the original pageant and its urban, *haole*fied performers.

In the closing scene the author character (Kneubuhl) address us and reweaves the play's metaphysical threads in a haunting statement of his poetics: "listen . . . and remember. For it is only in our remembering that we can make our *mele,* like houses of words into which our dead can move and live again and speak to us. . . . I have made this *mele kanikau,* a tattered tent against the indifferent rain, so that Love might once again cry out its loss through me . . . listen to their voices. . . . It is in you they grieve; it is through you they speak."

Throughout the trilogy Kneubuhl echoes the call for Polynesians to reconnect with their cultural past in order to infuse a vacuous present with some sense of cultural lineage, meaning, and individual integrity. *Mele Kanikau* was his first published play after returning to the islands from his twenty-year stint in Hollywood, writing screenplays for television programs like *The Wild, Wild West, Mission Impossible,* and *Adventures in Paradise.* As Kneubuhl describes that transition from tinsel town to the islands, "I was successful, but nothing could compensate for the essential hollowness of the work. I ended up feeling more alienated than ever, I quit and came home to Samoa in 1968." In 1975, *Mele Kanikau* appeared on the scene as a script, although

it was not to be staged until 1998, in a very fine production by the Honolulu theater group Kumu Kahua.

In *A Play, A Play,* published fifteen years later, in 1990, Kneubuhl continues his thematic exploration of cultural loss, confusion, and mixed heritage, only here through the vehicle of comedy. Set on the slopes of Volcano, Hawai'i, this drawingroom farce introduces James, an upper-crust, part-Hawaiian playwright on the verge of liquidating the venerable family homestead and running off to sip his sherry in Europe. However, in a supernatural turn of events, he reawakens to his cultural heritage thanks to a mysterious, antic visitation from the legendary goddess Madame Pele and her lively entourage of differently-gendered alter egos of various ages and sexual preferences.

Here, again, we find the layering and play of story lines: real, imagined, and legendary. Here that play is explicitly drawn with characters cast in dual roles, both as "actors" performing roles and also as the fictional characters themselves. The actors/characters weave back and forth between realities of fact and fiction. For example, our hero James Alama has an alter ego, "James Actor," who is the first to confirm the alarming discovery that he and the other characters are mere creations of some offstage someone called the playwright. There is much ado about mistaken identity, sexual frolic between humans and spirits, and parallel narratives that question the "real" and "unreal" as actors step in and out of role to ponder the deeper meanings of their provisional existence as "creations" of the playwright, who could well be nothing more than "some jerk . . . shooting his mouth off."

The actors/characters' ultimate realization and fright about their tenuous existence mirrors Kneubuhl's "real" story, his own fears about Hawaiians losing their cultural identity and thus any meaningful sense of self. Much of the farce turns on the characters' failure to recognize the legendary goddess Pele in their midst, to admit the ineffability of a native spiritual presence in their human world. She is after all portrayed as an androgynous, shape-shifting, brandy-swilling sexual athlete with a sad story to tell. These lapsed Hawaiians have forgotten what deities are like, how their own deities routinely operated. Only our hero James realizes that "Pele has come to us for a reason so important that it challenges our very right to live . . . she has come here to us so that we might teach her how she might once again be . . . a goddess relevant to our people at this time. . . . Poor Pele, she no longer knows what she is, what to be! . . . Poor us! Poor Hawaiians, we no longer know who we were or who we are. . . . How then can we live into the future . . ."

A Play, A Play marks a watershed in the development of Kneubuhl's poetics. While the familiar themes and parallel story lines are here, in this play Kneubuhl's aesthetic form blossoms through the humor of *fale aitu*

(house of the spirits), traditional Samoan satirical theater. Many of the classic earmarks of *fale aitu* are here, all at the service of highlighting fundamental questions of human existence, identity, and folly: the "breaking frame" of characters who step in and out of role to comment self-reflexively and ironically on the ambiguous nature of their dual identities (fictional character or human actor?), the elaborate word play with double entendre and punning, the stock characters like the wily female impersonator played by a straight actor, the ribald sexual humor. The two decades Kneubuhl had now spent rerooting himself in his native Samoan soil are evident in the flowering of indigenous aesthetic form in this play. Early in Act 1, James comments on his recently completed play: "It is as if, with this one play, I've discharged all my debts. My debts to this house where I was born and raised. My debts to my father and mother . . . and to my ancestors. My debts to my people. All over and done with. All paid." Surely it is no coincidence that these lines were written in the last several years of Kneubuhl's life.

Some say that *Think of a Garden,* Kneubuhl's last work, is his most "Samoan" play, because of its explicit subject and setting in Samoa. I would argue, however, that the penultimate *A Play, A Play* is his most "Samoan" work, at least by formal standards, because its aesthetic configuration, conventions, and stage business are so distinctively patterned on *fale aitu.* In the final scenes, the actors/characters agonize over their questionable existence as mere "creations" of some offstage "jerk." "He's working himself out. To find himself. Create himself. And in that work, he needs us. He becomes himself, through us. . . . He needs us, desperately. . . . He has made some mistakes that have to be corrected, different new tacks to try . . . a new way of hoping." Mirroring *fale aitu*'s traditional cultural role as a site for the transformation of social tensions through satirical humor, Kneubuhl aptly concludes *A Play, A Play* with a typically intertextual flourish: characters articulating his poetic project.

In Kneubuhl's last play, *Think of a Garden* (1991), we find a Samoa of the late 1920s, in which parallel worlds of human and nonhuman beings again come into direct play, this time intersecting with the historical narrative of the Western colonial invasion. Here, the writer/narrator explains at the outset that the young David, another mixed-blood hero, is actually modeled on himself as a child. The only offspring of Luisa, his "high-born" Samoan mother, and an enterprising American father, the ten-year-old David finds himself largely isolated from village life, thanks to Luisa's superiority complex toward the "common" villagers and his father's reservations about his son growing up "half-savage." David's lot worsens when he is stoned by an angry villager who objects to his disturbing their dead by befriending the ghost of a long-dead child.

David's stoning coincides with the political assassination of Western Samoa's paramount chief and resistance leader, Tupua Tamasese, who also happens to be an esteemed relative of Luisa's. As her brittle composure shatters under the weight of shock and grief, David snaps in his own wrenching way under the combined pressures of his mother's hysterical grief as well as her chronic obsession with social status and light skin color. In the ensuing emotional crisis, the family splits up; David is sent abroad to school, while his father and beloved uncle go their separate ways, leaving behind the bewildered Luisa for good, with "her confusion and her heartbreak . . . fruitcake and nausea, in a world of goodbyes."

Near the end of the play, an adolescent David visits home from the big city and finds the vividly remembered world of his boyhood to be oddly shrunken. He realizes that the flowers in the precious garden of memory were, like his only friend, completely imaginary. Suddenly we too can perceive David's imagination as magical refuge from a world of wrenching alienation and inexplicable loss, that imagination itself as a space of resistance against the vagaries of tormented adulthood and history. We might then hear an echo of the grown-up David/writer/character's invitation at the play's opening, "to think of that garden now as if it existed in your minds as truly and as beautifully as it did for me."

In *Think of a Garden,* the parallel narrative to David's personal story is one of Samoa's struggle for political independence from colonialist rule by New Zealand. By linking the boy's coming of age narrative to that of Tupua Tamasese, Samoa's Martin Luther King, Kneubuhl gives us an exquisite analogy. David's imagination as a site of personal resistance against the internalized colonialism of his parents becomes a mirror to Tamasese's political resistance against the colonial oppression of the West. In both narratives, the consequence of that resistance is self-determination. David is emotionally freed to move toward manhood, and Samoa is politically freed to move toward independence.

In the closing lines of the play, in the closing days of his life, John Kneubuhl, the native son come home at last, makes his farewells along with the writer/character perhaps, "repeating my goodbyes to that little boy and to his garden. . . . Never be far from me, little one. Lodge yourself in me, somewhere in the words I will seek all my life, and there, cry out your hurt, and cry until the words become a brown and shining young man" (the pacifist Tamasese, just prior to being gunned down) "raising his hands high and calling above the clamoring pain around us, 'Peace! Peace!'"

With the publication of this trilogy, John Kneubuhl's endowed chair in Pacific theater should be permanently secure. We can retire his jersey. This

work wondrously manages to synthesize postmodern and ancient aesthetics of intertextuality, while engaging modernist themes of loss and alienation. While the plays occasionally lapse into maudlin pontificating (missionary genes acting up?) and romanticized breast-beating about a lost Golden Age of cultural "authenticity," these are surely minor blemishes on the otherwise luminous stage of Kneubuhl's consummate artistry.

The long-awaited publication of *Think of a Garden and Other Plays* in this well-designed format from University of Hawai'i Press makes a major contribution to the field of Pacific literatures in English. An afterword by Jackie Pulani Johnson, "Editor's Note" by Vilsoni Hereniko, glossary, and footnoted translations of Samoan and Hawaiian segments offer readers an accessible, well-rounded presentation of the plays. Their availability in print, thanks to this excellent volume, should go a long way toward ensuring the wide readership and careful study such important work deserves.