

Editorial Notes: Going Somewhere New

Hilary Chung

The way is open

It's Time to go somewhere new

Alan Brunton, 'Leaving Luang Prabang'

In the fourth issue of **ka mate ka ora** we celebrate three important firsts. This is the first issue to be substantially devoted to a study of archive material, with three contributions which explore some of the theatrical and poetic journeys made by Alan Brunton and Red Mole. Capitalising on our electronic format we also feature for the first time a media gallery offering readers an audiovisual complement to some of these explorations. Our third first is an occasional correspondence section, launching with an exchange between Jack Ross and Massimo Bacigalupo which arose in response to issues raised in the former's essay, 'Pound's Fascist Cantos Revisited', **kmko #3** (March 2007).

This is an issue of journeys and transformations. Elizabeth Caffin, recently retired Director of Auckland University Press, traces the development of the riches of AUP's poetry list in 'robust defiance' of the publishers' maxim that books of poetry represent financial suicide. This is a journey of time, space and form. It traverses Caffin's own living room floor where the putative contents of *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* were once spread. In Kendrick Smithyman's house in Northcote it observes the poet improving directly on the proofs of poems written years previously. It pauses at Michele Leggott's shoulder as she supervises 'every visual detail of her books' and it witnesses the proliferations of form in which AUP sought to demystify and celebrate poetry, from book to CD to off-the-page events to collaboration with the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (**nzepec**). There is also much to be read between the lines.

Ken Bolton effects his own transformation of form while at the same time presenting ‘this tour of the various formal gambits, / or moves, I’ve made—“formal/attitudinal”’. The tour is also part of the exegetical component of his PhD thesis, written in verse and with a raft of footnotes where the waitress from the Flash Café near Adelaide’s Experimental Art Foundation shares space with Theodor Adorno and Bobbie ‘The Brain’ Heenan (from International World Wrestling) among others. Bolton’s tour takes in the ‘chastity’ of his early poems, it goes by way of the process poem, visits flowery diction and the fixed-form sestina before moving on to free association particularly in letter poems, collage, fragments and ekphrasis. The ever dress-conscious poetic traveller sums up the progress of his journey in terms of the progress of a shirt working its way ‘low in the drawer’:

Poet considers a shirt he used to wear—
why did he do it? how could he? would
he do it again? Should this shirt be destroyed
forever—is it a museum piece, tragic
—or empowering—handy for someone else? Is this, in fact,
the same shirt?

But a preoccupation with what to wear remains hazardous in even the most straightforward progress up the stairs if there is low head clearance at the top.

The feature essays of this issue each follow journeys in the life and career of poet Alan Brunton and theatre group Red Mole, their trajectories crisscrossing and mutually informing each other while at the same time pursuing their own distinct route. The first two essays by Michele Leggott and Martin Edmond also journey into the Brunton Rodwell Papers currently on temporary deposit at the University of Auckland Library’s Special Collections, where they are being sorted and inventoried. ‘Leaving Luang Prabang: A Tale of Two Travellers’ is an exploration of new departures. Using the archives to travel through time, Leggott traces the evolution of the poem ‘Leaving Luang Prabang’ and its multiple incarnations – departures by boat from a town on the river on the Lao-Thai border where many stories began for Alan Brunton and partner Sally Rodwell. In the early 1970s Brunton and Rodwell travel in South East Asia and move on

together as a couple. A chance meeting with other New Zealanders in Laos marks new departures in the lives of them all as the concept of Red Mole, anarchic, expansive and experimental, is born. There are variations in who leaves whom and who stays behind which incorporate a sense of loss as well as of moving forward. Both are re-enacted in later scripts, such that not only does the past become present but the past-in-present comes again. Leggott's archival archaeology reveals the death of old comrade Peter Fantl, who was there at the beginning, to be the missing link that completes the circle.

Martin Edmond's essay is dedicated to eating the wind, 'that kind of purposeful / purposeless wandering that seeks to find a better way', taking Alan Brunton's vow to 'eat the wind all my life' as its own point of departure. Not only does this essay carefully document Brunton and Rodwell's South East Asian itinerary but through its archival travelogue shows how aspects of that experience became transformed in their later work. Martin Edmond identifies the hill tribes of Sumatra and Sulawesi (Brunton's 'stone people') as a powerful source of inspiration, signifying the archaic within us, a concept which Red Mole would later explore in detail:

They would also import into their practice elements of the ceremonies and entertainments described above, in particular puppets and marionettes, and the use of gongs, flutes and drums. At a deeper level, the whole Red Mole project took place, not uncritically, within a shamanistic matrix.

Martin Edmond's archival research also contextualises the origin of Red Mole's epochal Liberty Bus and uncovers the source of the name Turnblazer – a perfect counterfeit for the self, and one of Brunton's first sustained poetic masks.

Murray Edmond's essay follows the evolution of Red Mole's *Cabaret Capital Strut* on a two and a half year journey from Veint's tearooms in Gore via the European avant-garde and the medieval mystery play to a sui generis staging of the history of the world in *Ghost Rite*. With *Cabaret Capital Strut*, Red Mole became the only New Zealand experimental theatre company of the 1970s to have taken full managerial control of a specific venue – Carmen's Wellington nightclub, The Balcony – but as the essay shows, this uniquely settled period became the forerunner of a decade of 'peripatetic restlessness' for Red Mole. Murray Edmond traces the way a 'genealogy of cabarets'

grew from *Capital Strut* which in turn gave birth to the epic *Ghost Rite* and out of which came a whole family of ‘big shows’ – *Goin’ to Djibouti*, *The Last Days of Mankind*, *Numbered Days in Paradise*, *Lord Galaxy’s Travelling Players* and *I’ll Never Dance Down Bugis St Again* – which were realised between 1978 and 1980. The essay includes rich descriptions of performances as well as an exploration of the central preoccupation of paradise and apocalypse:

Apocalypse is poised simultaneously at the point of collapse into total ruin and the revolutionary rebirth into a new (and better – perfect?) world. Apocalypse is the ideal phantasmagoria, the bright moment of simultaneously disappearing and re-forming, a magical act, a ‘ghost rite.’

A significant collaboration which resulted from Murray Edmond’s research was the production by Alan Brunton, in response to Edmond’s own efforts, of a definitive chronology of Red Mole’s work. It originally appeared as an appendix to Murray Edmond’s PhD thesis (1996), and an updated version is available on **nzepc** at http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/brunton/brief/mole_chron.asp. The Red Mole Chronology is one kind of index to almost three decades of poetry, theatre, film-making and publishing. The selection of images from a scrapbook compiled by Brunton and seen here for the first time supplies another kind of window on the journeys of 1970-1980, documentary, metonymic and moving. Brunton’s scrapbook also provides incidental co-texts for many details in the essays by Leggott, Edmond and Edmond.

I am delighted that it has been possible to supplement the three essays on Brunton and Red Mole with images, audio and video excerpts from the Brunton Rodwell Papers. These appear with the permission of Ruby Rodwell Brunton for whose support the editorial team expresses its grateful thanks.