

# Books & Culture

## Tearing up the stage

Black Grace founder Neil Ieremia and playwright Victor Rodger tap the repressive masculinity of Pasifika culture in a new work. **by SARAH CATHERALL**

**T**he creation of his latest dance work, *Crying Men*, became a form of therapy for choreographer Neil Ieremia, who is known for the powerful and athletic pieces performed by Black Grace, the group he founded 23 years ago. The new work is an exploration of masculinity, and particularly the way Pasifika men struggle to express their emotions.

Porirua-born, Auckland-based Ieremia's inspiration has often come from close to home. One piece, *Relentless*, was about child abuse, sparked by the kids who came to his Cannons Creek school with broken bones; a 2016 work, *A Letter to Earth*, was a response to a near-death experience during heart surgery; his pioneering *Black Grace* told of the struggle of male dancers in a rugby-obsessed culture.

In *Crying Men*, Ieremia looks back. He reflects on his life; of being raised by a Samoan father whose moods could turn dark at any time and who lived according to traditional Pacific Island expectations of masculinity.

Ieremia's parents migrated to Porirua from Samoa to give their four children – he is the youngest – a better life. Ieremia has said before that he always tried to prove himself to his father, Siufaitotoa. “We were all afraid. But he was wickedly funny and really loving. But he could change in the blink of an eye,” he tells the *Listener*.

The topic has long been on his mind, but it took playwright Victor Rodger to

help draw it out of him. Rodger has written a poetic narrative that will be spoken by actor Nathaniel Lees as a backbone of the choreography.

*Crying Men* follows a young couple and their son who move here from a Pacific island seeking a better life. Soon after they arrive, the wife and mother dies. “It completely wrecks the man. She was the saviour of his life,” says Ieremia.



**“I used to get angry at people when they cried. Crying doesn’t come easy to me. Sometimes I feel that I’m faking the cry.”**

“When she goes, he can’t seem to put it back together again. He reverts to his old life as a kid and what he knew as a kid growing up. He visits that on his son, and his son visits that on his son. It’s that idea of how we pass things down in generations. But it also looks back culturally to the Pacific, about having been a matriarchal society with strong female figures

in our mythology, and then having that taken away, and changing to a very male society.”

Rodger's stage dramas have explored themes of race, racism and identity, and *Crying Men* is his first dance piece. Ieremia told Rodger the stories he says he had “filed away neatly in little cupboards, closing a door on them”.

“Making art is great therapy. It’s cheap therapy. I imagined that Victor would start whipping out all these amazing words on paper. He listened to me for quite some time.

“He listened and all of a sudden it became okay to talk about these things that I hadn’t really talked about ... I’ve been able to go back and visit those memories and I can see how they’ve affected me and changed my life. I’m so privileged to be able to do this.”

*Crying Men* is mainly Ieremia's story, which is a departure for Rodger, who is used to telling ones based on his own life. “I always bang on about speaking your truth. When you’re speaking your truth, you’re speaking other people’s truth. This piece is full of truth,” he says.

The playwright has watched the piece's progress. He thinks the end result is moving. “I’m tearing-up now talking about it. It is incredibly true.”

Ieremia isn’t critical of his now 81-year-old father, seeing him simply as a product of his time. “My dad didn’t

**Intense collaboration: Neil Ieremia, above left, and Victor Rodger. Right, Black Grace dancers.**



have a lot of tools available to him as a young Pasifika man who was farmed out to relatives after his parents died. He tried to do the best by us, but he didn't have a lot of tools and he didn't acquire many when they moved to New Zealand."

A couple of incidents got Jeremia thinking about the culture of masculinity. His cousin's husband, a public defender, told him about his interviews with Māori and Pasifika men in jail. "He told me that a lot of those men will cry. There are some really tough guys in there. They always at least shed a tear." Around the same time, Jeremia was knocked to the ground by an older man, a stranger, in Wellington. "I was taken aback. That coupled, with my own life, got me thinking about all this masculinity crap."

Jeremia and Rodger are both in their late forties. They share Samoan backgrounds but their upbringings were different. Rodger was the child of a teenage mother who brought him up with her Scottish parents in Christchurch. She taught him to express his emotions and encouraged him to cry. He has written about his Samoan father and trying to fit in with his Pasifika family in award-winning play *Sons*.

Jeremia, by contrast, was taught not to cry. In the early days of *Black Grace*, the choreographer, who is known for pushing his dancers to their limits, would get frustrated when some cried during rehearsals. "I used to get angry at people when they cried. Crying doesn't come easy to me. Sometimes I feel that I'm faking the cry."

*Crying Men* includes music from hip-hop producers Matthew Faiumu Salapu (aka Anonymouz) and Andy Morton (aka Submariner), with Rodger's monologue in the background. "It's really rhythmic so it lends itself to movement. For us as movers, it allows us to elevate ourselves off the Earth a bit and think in a more heavenly fashion, which as artists and dancers we need to do," Jeremia says.

It's apt that the choreographer, who retired from performing in 2009, is taking the work to Porirua in September for an event that will include a collaboration with Whitirea Polytechnic performing arts students and local high schools. ■

*Crying Men*, ASB Waterfront Theatre, Auckland, September 6-8; *Black Grace & Friends*, Te Rauparaha Arena, Porirua, September 20-21.

# Exploring Endeavour

A new look at Cook's first voyage maps the life of his ship.

by SAM FINNEMORE

Few ships in history can be seen as often and thought of as seldom as James Cook's *Endeavour* in New Zealand. Frozen in time on our 50c piece, rounding Mt Taranaki in early 1770, it passes through most hands without a second look. It's an appropriately commonplace after-life for a very ordinary vessel with an extraordinary legacy – and surely one of *Endeavour's* only historical traces unmentioned in Peter Moore's epic biography of what he calls "one of the most significant objects of the Enlightenment".

Accounts centred on Cook's voyage typically sum up the ship's origins in the throwaway phrase "Whitby collier". Moore draws back the curtain on this

piece of trivia, from the acorn up, and the result is an enthralling cultural history of English oak, the physics and art of shipbuilding and the coastal traders that linked Newcastle's mines to London. This is probably the book at its best; within 100 pages, Moore has established the *Earl of Pembroke*, its name when launched without fanfare in 1764, as a ship with a lot to say about the age that produced it.

The bulk of the story naturally centres on *Endeavour's* most famous incarnation, in 1768, where its name and mission coincide with Moore's larger focus: capturing the spirit of 18th century endeavours – spectacular headlong rushes for the greater good. *Endeavour's* successful voyage under Cook was a case in point, and Moore captures the excitement and courage of the expedition. He also documents the bureaucracy, tantrums and bruised egos that preceded and followed the mission – the less elegant aspects of a grand Enlightenment venture.

He highlights alternative views of the ship's arrival, and its legacy, in Tahitian, Māori and Aboriginal communities, but appropriately leaves their perspectives to be told by others within those traditions.

No punches are pulled in recounting

**Endeavour: flagship for Enlightenment.**

# Off the charts

The collected works of James Cook inspire a visually rich exhibition and book.

by CHRISTOPHER MOORE

Captain James Cook RN still stands tall above the labyrinth of roadworks and vacant building sites in central Christchurch. William Trehewy's 1932 white marble statue shows the archetypal hero, telescope in hand, gazing intently towards distant horizons – the epitome of Walt Whitman's heroic sailor explorers, "few, very choice,



taciturn whom fate can never surprise nor death dismay".

For 250 years, this has been the accepted image of Cook. But viewed through the lens of these sceptical times, he becomes the despoiler of indigenous cultures and pathfinder for imperialism and European colonisation, with all their attendant ills.

You won't find any condemnatory