Female dramatic

Tiri Mahana from Witi Ihimaera’s Woman Far Walking

Time: the morning of Tiri’s birthday

Location: Tiri’s house

Tiri Mahana (Maori name: Te Tiriti o Waitangi Mahana) is 160 years old. Born on the day the Treaty of Waitangi was signed and named after it, Tiri is a survivor of more than a century and a half’s tumultuous personal and historical events. She has outlived two husbands and almost all her children. This speech is from Tiri’s opening monologue, which forms the play’s prologue.

The stage is bare and dark. Head bowed, in a wheelchair, is an old woman, Tiri. She is dressed in a white nightdress. Her hair is white, waist-length, and she wears it swept from the back of her neck and falling over one shoulder across her front. She has walking sticks in both hands. A sound like a gourd being shaken. Tiri lifts her head and leans forward. The spotlight is merciless, showing her wrinkles, white hair and all the signs of extreme old age. She gathers the audience into her gaze.

TIRI:

I am 160 years old. I was born on 6 February 1840. I am an aberration. A freak. People make the sign of the cross when they see me because I am against nature, an affront to God; they think Dracula must have bit me on the neck and made me into one of the living dead. Well if he did, he was the one who died.

My whakapapa, my genealogy, takes me back to the people of Te Tai Rawhiti, the East Coast. I
grew up at a time when the iwi Maori ruled the land. In those days before jet planes my ancestor, Paikea, came to these islands riding a majestic whale. The sky was a man and the earth was a woman – and I still greet them both –

Ihia te rangi! Ihia te mana!
Ko Ranginui kei runga,
Ko Papatuanuku kei raro,
Tēnā kōrua, tēnā kōrua, tēnā kōrua.

My mountain has always been Hikurangi, the first place in the world to greet the sun. When I was young I loved to watch the sun rising above the sea and to feel the earth quickening around me. There have been too many suns on too many mornings. That red ball, ascending from the morning sea, only tires me now.

Then one day, long before I was born, a visitor came to our islands. Hairy. White as a ghost. Smelling different. My grandmother was there. It was 1769 and she saw a huge frightening, white-winged bird coming across the water into Tolaga Bay. She said that Captain Cook alighted from the bird and his sailors looked like goblins. They had eyes in the backs of their heads because they rowed their boats with their backs to the land. They had three legs, and the third leg was called a musket. My grandmother told me that they welcomed this new goblin but – he killed them with his musket. Ever since I have been at war with him.

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/arts/drama/nzmonologues/index_e.php
Turuki turuki, paneke paneke!
Turuki turuki, paneke paneke!
Tēnei te tangata pūhuruhuru
Nāna i tiki mai whiti te rā!
A hupane, a kuapane!
A hupane kaupane whiti te rā!

_TIRI pauses, then talks directly to a member of the audience._

You want to know what a dinosaur looks like? Look at me. I'm a T-Rex. No comet, no flood, no volcanic eruption has finished me off. I'm still here. Like you, I had a mother whom I adored and a father whom I loved. I was not always – like this. People tell me I don't look my age – what do you think? They say I only look 130! Back then the blood danced young in my veins and everybody said I was beautiful like my mother.

I loved my mother. All she had to do was tell me what she wanted and I would do it. She would call, ‘E Tiri! E Tiri! Haramai! Haramai koe!’ and I would go to her. “Do this Tiri,” and I would do it. I was obedient to her because I loved her. I loved her so much that I kept watch on her all night. I would crawl into bed with her. I was afraid that she might not be there when I woke up. And I’d hold her tight to make sure she’d be there at day-break. My ten-year-old mokopuna, Jessica, she does the same thing with me now. But it’s me who doesn’t want to let her go! There’s nothing like holding the future in your arms.
I have lived longer than my mother, my sisters and brothers. I have outlived their children and their children’s children and their children’s children’s children. I have survived my first husband, my second husband and all the loved companions of my youth. The young always think only they enjoy the embrace of a husband. When they look at me they cannot believe a woman of my age has ever known passion. But I have known such beautiful husbands, such sweet men. They will always be young to me. I would not want them to see me as I am now. They are gone – all the beautiful babies we made, they too are gone, gone, gone. Oh my plump beautiful babies …

_TIRI_ bends and clasps her abdomen, _remembering the babies that have come from her womb. She begins to sing a waiata tangi. As she sings, she is accompanied by the sound of waves crashing on a beach._

Rimurimu, tere tere, ki te moana e!
Tere ana ki te ripo i waho e!
Tirohia atu ki waho rā, marino ana e!
Kei roto i ahau, marangai ana e –

**Commentary**

Commissioned by the 2000 New Zealand Festival of the Arts, _Woman Far Walking_ is about Tiri Mahana who is 160 years old in 2000. On one level the play is set on the day of Tiri’s 160th birthday party, which culminates in a telegram from the Queen. On another level the action takes place in Tiri’s memory and imagination.

According to writer Witi Ihimaera the themes of the play are “the survival, struggles and resilience of the Maori people as shown through the life of one woman.” It is written for two actors; Tiri is joined onstage by Tilly, a woman in her mid-30s who constantly questions Tiri’s version of historical events.

In the original production Tiri was played to great critical acclaim by Rachel House, then in her 20s. So don’t be put off from playing an 160-year-old.

➤ Compare this monologue with Aroha Maitaira’s speech from *The Pohutukawa Tree*, written almost 50 years earlier.