A breath of peace

An interview with Kathleen Gallagher

Kathleen Gallagher is well known as a poet, playwright and author of radio dramas, with extensive experience and success in these fields. She has had three collections of poetry published—*Tara* (1987), *Gypsy* (1993) and *Twilight Burns The Sky* (2001). She has been writing plays for theatre since 1984. Kathleen received the New Zealand Playwrights Award in 1993. In 1996 her radio play *Charlie Bloom* was a finalist in the New Zealand Radio Awards and the New Zealand Media Peace Awards. Her first collection of plays *Mothertongue* with Women's Action Theatre (WAT) was published in 1999 by Publishing Giant Press, Christchurch. Her second collection *Peace Plays* was published in 2002—one of these plays *Hautu* was written especially for the Chrysalis Seed arts festival (2002)—and a thirty-three minute documentary *Peaceful Pacific*, in 2004. Her first short film *Jimmy Sullivan* was launched at the Academy Cinema, Christchurch, in 2000.

Kathleen Gallagher, 2006. Photo: Andrew Clarkson

This interview, however, features her work as a filmmaker. It focuses on her film *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace* (2005)[1] and explores the stories behind the film's production. Kathleen shares her personal motivation, inspiration and the people and places that influenced her, both in life and in the making of this dynamic film.

Kathleen's work is often an expression of her life values; being a peace activist herself, *Tau Te Mauri/ Breath of Peace* reflects this inner consistency. Internationally the film has been well received, assisting the healing process of grief from the horror of exploded nuclear weapons in World War II (WWII) and from subsequent testing. Acting as a tribute to the New Zealand peace movement and its heroes, the film works as an educational tool for future generations. It is also a current reminder of the significance and impact of New Zealand's contribution to the World Court's findings for world disarmament of nuclear weapons.

The film begins with a combination of poetry and scenes of nature; the uniquely beautiful kotuku (white heron), dolphins swimming free and the majestic sight of whales in motion. These clips are interspersed throughout *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace,* giving room for digesting the sadness and the triumph of eight New Zealand peace activists telling their personal stories. From a WWII conscientious objector sharing his experience of the war, to a reflection on the outcry over the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* [2], the film shows the shift in a country changing its attitudes and alliances and demanding a change in law to a 'Nuclear Free New Zealand'. *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace*'s impact is profound, ending with the World Court agreeing with Kate Dewes and Pauline Tangiora of New Zealand, and calling for international disarmament. After viewing *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of*

Peace I was honoured to meet the film's writer and producer.

Where did the personal motivation come from for *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace*?

'I met with Kate Dewes and Ruth Greenaway. The idea was to start doing interviews with people involved in the peace movement in Christchurch. When I heard them talking, I started to feel this was not just an oral thing; it needed to go further. The stories were extraordinary. They needed to be accessible to the world. A short time later I was on holiday between Takaka and Farewell Spit. I was by a blue-green lake and watching a kotuku. My Dad used to say: "Listen to the birds—listen to what they have to say". I watched this kotuku.'

For a time the kotuku flew, moving beautifully on and off the branch of a tree in front of her. Kathleen observed the bird's grace and ease; she knew the moment held significance. 'So I listened to this kotuku and I felt that the peace story had to be told to the world by film. I also knew that the kotuku was part of the story; and that is why we included kotuku in the film.'

Did you have any distinctive moments or main turning points in making the film?

'When I was talking to Pauline Tangiora [campaigner for peace disarmament]. Looking into her eyes I felt

and sensed I was looking into the eyes of a whale. There was a depth, like a deep pool of dark water. It was then I knew the whales also were to be in the film.

'The Aborigines in South Australia could not call up the whales any more. They called people from New Zealand and North America to a gathering. As Pauline walked with the people down to the water, a *karanga*[3] came to her and she called out over the water; the whales came up playing and throwing their babies in the air—they were back!'

This happening is shown only briefly in the film, yet it illustrates the power of these special individuals. Kathleen describes the eight peace activists featured in the film. 'All of them have a physical presence, a feeling of peace. They live it in their daily lives, an authenticity. They have put their lives on the line, yet they see it as ordinary, not extraordinary—they see it as what they have to do, an ordinary response. They would say "How else would you, could you, respond?"'

Has having four children of your own influenced your desire to take action in 'humanity' projects?

'No, not really—I would do it anyway; but I thought there is a need for them to know. When I made *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace*, it was also for the young people of New Zealand, so that they would know where to start from ... knowing our stories, the peace stories of New Zealand. I was personally involved in some of the actions like the Peace Squadron in Christchurch. So I was aware of some of the stories already.'

Do you think anything in your upbringing or personal life led you to being a peace activist?

'Two things really. My experience of Villa Maria College. The Mercy Sisters taught us there—young New Zealand women. They taught us about prayer, love, and that we could change the world with prayer and love. They all taught it, and they lived it. The head teacher of Villa went on the last anti-Vietnam War march in about 1975. This was an incredibly brave and courageous act for a school principal to do in those days. I was profoundly influenced by these courageous and progressive women.

'I finished my degree in Religious Studies and History when I was twenty and travelled overseas to North and South America. I realised poor people with good strong communities were able to live happy, fulfilled lives, and rich people as in the United States could live broken, bitter and very sad lives—that the accumulation of wealth was inherently unsatisfying and did not bring joy.'

What do you think made for the strong communities?

'Communities in the end, they had prayer and they did manual work. Extended families were a given. Caring and loving, people who were clear about what mattered.'

And what was that for them?

'Love.'

How have you drawn on your own faith in producing your work?

'Having faith is a journey (experienced) over a long time. My faith and understanding of God in the world has evolved throughout my life. Faith is not a static thing; it develops—like a tree growing. The roots get deeper, the fruit becomes more abundant. I don't think Catholics are overtly evangelistic, almost the opposite. It is like: "See those Christians, how they love one another". It is almost a practice of love and prayer. Quietness and stillness are given priority—contemplative.'

Do you feel that it is more important now than ever to be able to clearly hear God's voice in the busyness and noise of modern society?

'Yes. I think it is important to make places of quietness and stillness, sacred places. And to do manual labour—like cooking, washing, sweeping floors, mowing lawns, gardening and walking. Not using machines to do these things, so we are quiet and we can hear.'

"My Dad used to say: "Listen to the birds—listen to what they have to say". I watched this kotuku

Portraits below from left to right:

Jack Rogers: Conscientious objector during WWII, imprisoned 1939–1946.

George Armstrong: Instigated the first New Zealand Peace Squadron protests against the nuclear ship visits.

Mary Woodward: Campaigner for nuclear disarmament in the late 1940s–1960s.

Nicky Hagar: Involved in organising the Wellington Peace Squadron and Nuclear Free Zones. Researched and exposed the extent of the United States spy network in New Zealand.

So you see these things as meditational?

'Yes, but we can corrupt them by doing them with machines and then we don't hear God in the earth, the sky and air around us ... the sea and rivers; the quietness.'

The power of individuals making a mighty difference is inspirational; the film allows contemplation of this through intelligent and elegant editing. As a result of the film being shown within New Zealand and internationally, an ongoing healing and educational effect is occurring. After the film launch (August 2005) at The Arts Centre in Christchurch, viewers filled the Great Hall. With the cast of eight activists on stage the crowd stood and clapped and clapped, and clapped. Included in the cast were Jack Rogers (a WWII conscientious objector imprisoned for the duration of the war, who deeply mourned the death of 220,000 people killed as the result of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and Mary Woodward (a nuclear protester from the 1950s, who had experienced having things thrown at her as she marched in the streets of Christchurch). Both now stood crying in disbelief and gratitude at witnessing the changed hearts and attitudes of New Zealanders.

After the success at the World Court, finding 'Yes, nuclear weapons are generally illegal, all states have a commitment to disarmament', members of the Japanese delegation expressed appreciation and gratitude at having the extent of their grief over the horror of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recognised in an international court for the first time. With the showing of the film in Japan, Kathleen was contacted by a Japanese woman saying she understood why the film was made and its appropriateness to Japan, why the New Zealand peace story makes sense. Kathleen was informed that the kotuku—that she had sensed was so important to listen to—was the Japanese symbol for peace.

Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace now seems to be continuing to help the work begun by the peace activists. Kathleen explains: 'An elderly woman unknown to me contacted me asking for two copies of the film because she has a regular morning tea session where she screens the film for friends to come and watch. I am aware of others who have been moved to action to buy eight copies and send them all over the world. Copies of the film along with a booklet have also been supplied to all High Schools in New Zealand through the Christchurch Peace Foundation and a national educational group.

'It was not until the film was nearly complete that we could see how the combined actions of the peace activists had created a momentum that connected people in New Zealand.' The process of change in New Zealand has continued to have international influence, through a ripple effect. *Tau Te Mauri/Breath of Peace* is documentary evidence of the collective power of individuals connected by their convictions and through their willingness to take action. 'Initially in New Zealand, prior to 1984, there was a feeling, a questioning, of how can these protesters do anything effective against these mighty powers within the world (particularly France and the United States of America)? But they did.'

Janet Joyce

1 Reviewed more fully in *CS Arts*, July 2006.

2 *Rainbow Warrior* is the name of a series of ships operated by Greenpeace. The first ship was sunk by the French foreign intelligence agency (DGSE) in Auckland harbour, New Zealand, on 10 July 1985. The current ship using the name was launched in 1989.

3 Karanga: (*noun*) the ceremonial call of welcome by women of the Marae.

Tau Te Mauri / Breath of Peace

Old islands young islands
Sea birds, people hearing
The wairua of the land
The rise and fall of sea

Peace people of Aotearoa New Zealand
Walking biking through the night
Hammering on planes of war
Sailing across the Pacific

Stories of walking and waka
Small boats and surfboards
Typewriters, kitchen tables
Hikoi and hammers.

Kathleen Gallagher

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'81 Springbok tour

many many people
running together in twos in fours
together in tens running
chanting chanting running chanting
rolling like thunder
haka chanting
many people
old armies coming coming
old shields crash helmets balaclava
rubbish bin lid shields
coats thick with newspapers
many people coming singing smiling walking
grimly walking chanting singing
arms linked surging
in the mud the winter mud
of the rugby park in hair in fingers
our hands mud
police wild batons clubbing us in mud
coils of barbed wire strung out barbed army wire
cold scarred scared eyes of police
rubbish bins barricading blocking
tight knots of police
thick hands knuckles gripping batons
thin bone of knuckles shining through
"Amandla! Amandla! Amandla Nga Whetu
Amandla Nga Whetu!"
"Amandla! Amandla! Amandla Nga Whetu!
Amandla Nga Whetu!"
feet walking black wet road
feet walking tramping walking tramping
chanting tramping waving banners
singing tramping
rain biting streets winter city square
arms linked marching
in procession
walking silent
walking
mud in your hair
mud on your knees
mud on your hands
in procession
banners flying high
above the fifty-six day faces
above the black coats
above the silent tread of boots
above the silent linking to arms

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