

ENCORE



Toi's no ordinary storyteller

By KURT SHANKS

Trying to pinpoint exactly what Toi Maihi does is difficult.

Toi can probably most accurately be described as an artist, although whether this term covers her storytelling and kelp-hanging (yes, kelp-hanging) skills is open to debate.

In her Birkdale house dried seaweed hangs from the ceiling, ready to be taken down to Wellington where it will be displayed in the foyer of the National Library.

Toi thinks she is the only kelp hanger in New Zealand. In her extensive travels around the coasts of Aotearoa she has never met anyone else collecting seaweed for a similar purpose.

While a child Toi remembers visiting beaches around the North Island with her father, who was from the Ngati Kahungunu tribe.

They would put the seafood in kelp bags made from dried out seaweed. Toi says she has been involved with seaweed ever since, but this is by no means her only interest.

Toi first began reading books to children when she was a school teacher at Mowhango in the central North Island during the 1950s. She soon discarded the books and instead created her own stories, and her pupils stopped to listen.

"All children loved the stories. Some things become clearer, not with printed words, but with stories we tell in different ways - whether that be miming, dancing or sculpturing."

Toi grew up having stories told her by her parents and she has passed on stories to her children. Having a Maori father and a Yorkshire mother meant she was told a diverse range of tales.

"We never went to bed without a story. Whenever we went through the bush or along the beach we were told stories. It was natural."

Toi has been asked to participate in the 1990 festival of storytelling which kicked off prematurely last month when Don Selwyn, Lynette Neil and "Bringwonder" got together to tell stories outside Birkenhead Library.

She is also involved with the community as a member of the Awataha Marae landscape committee and has been asked to teach Maori weaving techniques after the marae's opening in November. She is also involved in deciding which native plants will feature in the complex and has also taught weaving to students at polytechnics throughout New Zealand.

Her weaving expertise has seen her asked to put together a book on Maori fibre techniques. Toi says there is more than enough material to fill one book, so she has decided to divide it into two separate volumes.

Taniko - Maori Fibre Techniques, and Karanga - Maori Plating Techniques. The first volume is due for publication in 1991.

"Taniko ties social changes to the changes in the garments. It traces the development of Maori fibre techniques from pre-European times until today," says Toi.

"I never intended to write a book but so many of the old people asked me to."

In an effort to encompass all styles of Maori fibres and weaving, Toi travelled to 11 different tribes in the North Island to get the elders' approval. The books will be distributed in shops and also throughout schools by the Education Department.

The Fisher Art Gallery in Pakuranga will exhibit some of Toi's kelp hangings and paintings from January 18. Go along and view art with a message.



Toi Maihi in her Birkdale home working on her contribution to the Commonwealth Games quilt.
Photo: ERIN ARMSTRONG.