

# 16

## Raiwaqa and the Playhouse

Larry Thomas

I still remember quite vividly the first time I was in a play. I was in my second year of primary school. I can't recall the name of the play except that it was based on a nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty. I played Humpty Dumpty, 'as I was sitting on a wall wondering whether I might fall, I saw a man with sack in hand ...' the only line I can remember! Underneath my shirt was padding to make my (small) stomach look very big. It was the annual school concert and I was chosen to play the part presumably because I could 'project' my voice. It was to come in useful many years later, when a director would say, 'you need to project Larry'. My grandmother sitting in the audience at the Civic Centre was very proud of me, even though she didn't understand a word of the play as she couldn't speak or understand English. Outside the Civic Centre she beamed with pride as wellwishers complimented *her* that I was very good. Years later during my last year of primary school we performed scenes from a couple of plays and one I remember well was a dramatised scene from *Great Expectations*. I played Pip. It was the graveyard scene. Years later I not only read the book, I watched a couple of versions of the film and later taught the book at university. It remains one of my favourite books.

At that time, I lived in Derrick Street, in Raiwaqa. Derrick Street was perhaps one of the most, if not the most, well-known street in Raiwaqa! One evening returning home in the taxi I directed the driver to Derrick Street. At the top of Bryce Street just where the Methodist church is, he

stopped: 'I'm not going to Derrick Street.' It's a street notorious for youths who'd 'step' taxis, running away without paying. This was common until drivers wised up to it. What distinguishes Derrick Street is the many alleyways and side paths one could run through, making it easier to disappear in.

I grew up in and around the city, in Raiwaqa, a bus ride away, and for my whole life I have always lived a bus ride away from the city except for now: now I actually live in Suva city, and a short walking distance from the Playhouse and a bus ride away to Raiwaqa. With the establishment of the Housing Authority, Raiwaqa was one of the first, if not the first, low-cost housing estates, developed in the early sixties to cater for low-income families. This model has since been replicated throughout the country. Raiwaqa was unique, and continues to remain so, in that the design of the houses varied in shape and size. In those early years, I am sure, these designs were experimental, working out which ones were the most resilient. Within Raiwaqa, there were the two-storey flats, and depending which place you lived the houses varied. Some had the bathroom and toilet downstairs at the back while others had it upstairs. These were the first designs and remained so for a while. There were a few oddly shaped 'domes' or what we referred to as 'elephant houses'. Why we called it that I don't know, but it was and still is known as that. Maybe because it 'resembled' the body of an elephant? Only one still remains, hidden from view by an extension in front. The single units then began to be constructed and appeared together with newer models of prefab (concrete) two-storey flats.

These houses were affordable and, in the true sense of the word, low cost. That was the premise within which the Housing Authority was established: affordable, low-cost housing. People from the outlying islands flocked in and those who met the criteria bought their houses. Mortgage payments were very low. There was many a time when we defaulted with our payments, but we were always safe; occasionally a notice would come for non-payment and we'd scramble to make the payment.



**Figure 16.1: Elephant house, Raiwaqa, 2022.**

Source: Photo provided by author, March 2022.

People came from the Maritimes, from Kadavu, Lomaiviti and Lau. The neighbourhood was multiracial, Fijians (iTaukei), Indo-Fijians, mixed race, otherwise known as Part-European(/Fijian), Rotumans, Banabans and Chinese, if you throw in the local shops! Each New Year's Eve the Lauans would walk through the streets singing and beating and banging on empty biscuit tins. The merriment was met with people throwing powder on their hair and dancing. Those celebratory moments usually reserved for village festivities were now transported onto the urban streets of Raiwaqa.

The different religious denominations – the Methodists, Catholics, Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventists – lived side by side with the Hindus and Muslims. I attended Methodist services since my maternal grandmother was a Methodist, even though all her children and grandchildren were Catholics. I attended Sunday school classes at the Assemblies of God, and also at the Mormon Church. And all this time I continued going to mass, in fact I was forced to go to mass (by my Methodist grandmother), and I was still okay to attend the services of the other denominations.

I cannot look back at a world I once knew without some memories of regret. I sometimes regret that I have forgotten much of my childhood memories and the years of growing up. I reminisce now and again but much of what I remember is filtered through age. I recall the time and the general period of that time, be it the sixties, seventies or eighties or any other time. I remember certain details. For me it was always falling while running, grazing my knees and running to my grandmother, who was not sympathetic at all, instead would give me a whack, I shouldn't cry when I fall. I feel like Humpty Dumpty!

Growing up in the sixties, my grandmother and my mother were the most important people in my life. What I remember a lot was going to the city in the wooden Raiwaqa bus. There was a driver whom people labelled 'superman' because he drove like crazy. Going to Suva city was always an occasion! I remember the bus fare to Suva was threepence – later 3 cents, after Fiji became independent, with her own currency.



**Figure 16.2: Outdoor market, Suva, 1939.**

Source: Whites Aviation Ltd, Photographs. Ref: WA-03285-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [natlib.govt.nz/records/30654320](http://natlib.govt.nz/records/30654320).

And there was Mrs Rounds. We were all afraid of Mrs Rounds. This strict no-nonsense Samoan woman kept all the schoolchildren in check and in place as we lined up each morning to wait for our respective school buses. She always had a stick in her hand and was never afraid to use it. We were all very orderly, each school in their own section. Now as I think back, I wonder who put her there to supervise us? To berate us and discipline us! With a couple of hundred schoolchildren waiting for their buses on the pavement by the side of the road, it was a wonder no one got run over! I remember her face, never smiling. Much later, I got to know her family and she was nothing like the 'bus mistress'.

10 October 1970. I was in primary school and at the end of the day each student was given a loaf of bread to take home. It was our celebratory gift and I guess if it wasn't for the loaf of bread Fiji's Independence would be just another day. When you're poor, a loaf of bread is a meal in itself.

Fast forward to early 1987. Just before the military coup, I set out to produce a series of short radio programs, simply looking at Fiji from the eyes of men and women over the age of 60 and asking what they thought of the country, before and after Independence. All the interviewees said that it was too early to be independent and we should have waited. They were not happy with the changes and preferred when Europeans ran the country, 'they knew what they were doing'. I disagreed with them, but I kept my opinion to myself. I was pleased though that we had become independent. But now as I approach the age my interviewees were, I can appreciate their point of view.

The country has withstood the upheavals over the years following 1987 and has suffered the economic and social impacts of the political turmoil of the last three decades. But in spite of that we struggle on with resilience. That is what makes the country unique, and Suva is at the heart of that: a small vibrant city, the centre of much of the political upheaval and the centre of most things cultural, artistic and political. It is easily accessible, and I like the limitations and the limited selections of choices of many things. Sometimes we can't help it when we make unfair comparisons of Suva to larger cities (for us the [wannabee] sophisticates) but that often stems from frustrations, because we want this city to be like other big cities in its offerings. But often it is good to remember that sometimes being small is beautiful.

Suva is still my favourite place. In many ways it is a microcosm of the larger cities I have visited around the world, and while these larger cities are quite overwhelming, Suva is underwhelming, limited by its size, yet retaining its unique characteristics, the ethnic diversity, the location – the harbour, mountains across the water and the unmistakeable Joske's Thumb, the (remaining) colonial architecture, and the very vibrant and colourful market.

I have lived my whole life in Suva, and my memories of growing up in this city remain vivid. I have watched the city transform; the open-air wooden buses and the 'half-loaf' buses, the 'traffic' police at the market and bus stand standing on a circular wooden platform directing traffic, people always very well dressed, the old buildings sometimes a reminder of a Western movie set.

Two things were quite significant for me. Growing up in Raiwaqa and being involved in theatre, more specifically, the Fiji Arts Club and the Playhouse. Raiwaqa and the Playhouse were the antithesis of each other, one being the 'real world' the other being in 'another world'. Yet one could say there was a symbiosis. The reality of life in Raiwaqa provided the experience for me to draw from as an actor and eventually as a writer. They were just different spaces: one was more restrained, while the other gave me an opportunity to express myself, to enter and be part of a sometimes different world, albeit for a few hours.

If I lived in a more affluent suburb of Suva, came from a middle-class family and completed high school then it would have been more expected for me to be a member of the Fiji Arts Club. In the mid-seventies the members of the club were predominantly expatriates from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, with a handful from the United States and Europe. The Fiji Arts Club was established by British expatriates who wanted a place for the arts, theatre and dance and music(als). The Playhouse was built and became the only theatre of its kind in Fiji. So, the membership of the club was predominantly expatriates who catered towards a mainly expatriate audience. Into this milieu I entered, a poor brown kid, from the housing estates.

There are good teachers, very good teachers and there are great teachers. I was fortunate to have a great teacher. Bob Miles opened the door to a life that I would otherwise never have been exposed to and I imagine my life today would be quite different without him. He was an eccentric

and that is what distinguished him, and for a young kid from Raiwaqa he was really 'different' and interested in my life, but most importantly he introduced me to literature and classical music. He had lived in Fiji for a very long time, having first taught in Levuka and Savusavu before settling in Suva.

Through him I was introduced to the world of theatre, transitioning from high school to performing at the Playhouse and eventually becoming a member of the Fiji Arts Club. When Bob invited me to join the cast of a play he was directing at the Playhouse, I reluctantly agreed, in part because I was very nervous of being in a new environment, quite alien from what I was used to and outside my comfort zone. But I was also curious and it was a new experience and I was quite honoured to be asked by Bob to be in the play, even though I only had two lines!

Though I was just a teenager, I knew the Playhouse was going to be a fun place to be and for a few hours at a time I escaped the reality of my life in Raiwaqa. I was learning something new, something different. It was opening up a whole new world. I marvelled that a (small) space, the stage, could be transformed into a town, a street, a garden, the interior of living rooms and bedrooms and so on, and in the middle of this, emotions were intense, love was declared, wars were fought and murder was committed! It was 'real' but unreal. But in Raiwaqa it was all real. The declaration of love segued into teenage pregnancy, violent physical and verbal abuses, occasional 'gang' (neighbourhood) wars and school dropouts, but this was punctuated by wonderful games, camaraderie, community, respect and an appreciation of how people lived their lives. It was vibrant and always exciting for me and that was the only life I knew; it was a familiar and relatively safe environment. To be exposed to a new and very different one was daunting and scary to say the least. Sometimes it was like being schizophrenic, being who I am in one and being someone else in another. I wanted to really fit in to this other environment.

Following high school, I continued to be active in theatre and worked full-time. My first cousin and 'big sister' happened to be living with Dr Chris Griffin (they're still happily together), an anthropologist and at that time teaching sociology at the University of the South Pacific. I became an 'unofficial' researcher for Chris as he was always keen to listen and hear stories of what was going on in the neighbourhood. It was through this experience that he encouraged me to write a play, more so because he knew of my interest in theatre.

My first play *Just Another Day* was written in my old house in Derrick Street, in Raiwaqa in 1980. Chris gave me his old 'mini' typewriter to use. It took me exactly a whole year to write the play and as I tapped away on my very own typewriter, which in itself was such an exciting novelty, my mother lay upstairs very ill, and around me the cacophony of diverse sounds filled the two-bedroom, two-storey flat.

Each time I sat down to write, each time at the same spot, the characters in the play came 'alive', not so much in my head or on the page but around me. I could hear people talking and laughing, the shouts of a domestic dispute, children being disciplined and crying, or at my door there would be a knock, someone asking for tea or sugar, or just popping in for a chat.

I couldn't stop and say, please don't disturb me, I'm writing! It wouldn't make any difference and far more complicated to explain. I would just stop. If they enquired what I was doing I would just say, I'm writing something. So, as I wrote, the characters I was writing about were visiting me or I'd hear them not too far away or see them through the window, walking past.

After I wrote the play, I gave it to Chris to read and a few others who were all very encouraging with their comments. But it was a friend of mine visiting from Germany who read the play and her one comment that got me was, 'this play is very depressing, it doesn't go anywhere'. And that's the whole point! She nailed it. The play doesn't go anywhere; it is just a cycle reflecting the lives of people living in a poor area just managing to make ends meet and even that was difficult at the best of times. The cycle that keeps going around with no exit in sight, people repeating their actions and words, over and over, day in day out. To break out of the cycle is a challenge but to exit the cycle takes courage.

Having studied a little drama, been part of the drama group in high school, and, at that time, having been involved with a few productions at the Fiji Arts Club, I felt I had a sense of 'the stage'. So, writing the play and knowing where to move and place the characters wasn't as difficult as I imagined. The play was to 'sit' for another seven years before I gathered the courage to produce it. During that time, I did some more work on it and in 1988 it finally saw the light of day and was staged at the Playhouse.

Post-Independence saw an influx of migration into Suva, evidenced by the increase in the construction of more single and two-storey flats and what was then known as the 'Four Storey' or 'Taba Va' in a newly developed

area of Raiwaqa, and Raiwai the neighbouring suburb. The ‘four storeys’ were built specifically to cater for single or small families, ideally waiting to transition to more substantive single or two-storey units they could purchase. These tenements catered a lot for people coming in from the western parts of the island as well as from Vanua Levu and the Maritimes.

These ‘four storey’ tenements were for rental only and could not be purchased. It was supposed to accommodate up to four people, a couple and perhaps two children. It was easier said than done and having lived in one of these tenements it was clearly not the case. More often than not they were overcrowded and far exceeded the number of people supposed to be living there.

Because of family circumstances I moved around Raiwaqa and Raiwai and ended up back in Derrick Street in my later years of high school. During that time there was a steady increase in the population. In Derrick Street, new faces appeared. The neighbourhood I had grown up in, in the sixties and seventies, had begun to evolve and the sense of community that comes from living in a small populated area was now no longer small. The area had not grown in size, but the population had increased and overcrowding grew as a result of people coming in from around the country.



**Figure 16.3: One of the original houses left in Raiwaqa, 2022.**

Source: Photo provided by author, March 2022.

With the exception of a couple of houses, the people in my immediate neighbourhood remained the same and the children I had grown up with were now young men and women, a few had already settled with children. They had begun working and had their own families, though still living with their parents.

For the next five years I became heavily involved in theatre and the Playhouse was almost my second home. I enjoyed the acting roles I was given but also equally enjoyed backstage work and that was where I learnt much of the stagecraft that was to come in useful years later when I ventured more into directing. A decade after Independence, there were fewer expatriates around and even though the Arts Club was still active, productions became fewer. There just weren't enough people around to produce and direct. There were so few locals involved or interested in theatre that it became difficult to fill the void left by expatriates. Like any amateur theatre, people become involved because they have a love for drama, acting, dance and music. Theatre provided that space for creativity and a place to share experiences.



**Figure 16.4: The Playhouse, 2022.**

Source: Photo provided by author, March 2022.

While my involvement in theatre consumed a large part of my social life, I still had to work to pay the bills and this I did with a few exceptional periods of unemployment, but even then I continued to find the bus fare to attend rehearsals. To be a member of the Arts Club one had to pay to become a member. I couldn't afford the membership fee, minimal as it was. I was fortunate that some kind person offered to pay my membership but on condition of anonymity. Eventually I could afford to pay the small amount but when you have low wages, paying membership fees to a club was, for me, a luxury.

Theatre provided the opportunity for me to view my life and life in Raiwaqa differently. It had become a strong influence on my perspective on life. The change in atmosphere for a few hours each evening at the Playhouse dissipated the noise and aimlessness many young people my age were faced with. It was a different world and though it may be a world of 'make believe', the plays reflected a reality, though different from my own, which still resonated with me, moved and cheered me.

Working in the theatre was not a career, it was a hobby. I enjoyed the excitement and fun of it and the passion I began to develop allowed me to cultivate skills that perhaps would have remained dormant. It exposed me to a very different environment and forced me out of my comfort zone. Manoa Rasigatale had the Dance Theatre of Fiji and they were developing and creating amazing dance, still using the *meke* form but taking it to a whole new level. But it was more than that, it was theatre, onsite at their Pacific Harbour cultural village. It was a new and different experience, 'sailing' the audience through Fiji's past history, authentically told and performed. The arts were just never seen as part of development, there was no revenue that could be derived from it. Traditional dances – *mekes* – mat weaving, tapa and pottery making, were viewed as cultural traditions and not as part of the 'arts' per se despite it being labelled 'arts and culture'. The emphasis was on culture and tradition not the arts. For people like me, this could never be a career but for those artists, especially the visual artists – and there were a few – they were courageous enough to decide that their art was their career and they did it because of their passion. Monetary consideration was secondary even though for many of them survival continued to be a struggle.

It was working in the theatre that kept me going and kept me focused and to the point that I seriously considered working full-time and forming a kind of national theatre. Like most things it came down to finance and

sustainability and I had to be realistic that it would not work. There was no drama school and drama wasn't even offered at the university. There was no 'national' interest. Each time I produced and directed a play, more often than not I worked with people with no experience and new to acting. Each play was a crash course in Acting 101.

It seemed a seamless transition to graduate from acting and directing to writing plays. It was just something I wanted to do and I wanted to write about the place where I lived and what went on there. I was simply transferring reality to the page and onto the stage. After I wrote the first play, *Just Another Day*, it still didn't occur to me that I would stage it. Of course, it makes sense that a play needs to and should be performed. Somehow, I didn't believe in my own abilities. For a very long time, I struggled with believing that I did indeed write plays drawing from stories of everyday life and directed these plays that people came to watch and enjoy and appreciated. I lacked the confidence to believe and trust in myself. That lack of self-esteem stems largely from growing up in a place like Raiwaqa. To be poor is not to 'shine'. To blow your own trumpet is to show off and be arrogant. One is not taught to think, for to think is to emancipate yourself and to emancipate yourself is to be different. It's very hard to break out of that cycle, and what worked for me would not necessarily work for another. We all have strengths and weaknesses but some of us just have that added strength not to be afraid to take that leap and dare to be different, without meaning to be. It just happened.

To be an artist in this country then, and to an extent even now, is like walking down a long road, alone. There is no encouragement. This is not because people don't want to encourage you, rather they can't understand what you're doing and why you're doing it simply because it doesn't generate any income. And what's worse, you're spending your own money towards what you're wanting to achieve. This lack of interest is reflected in put-downs and jokes about your 'job' such as 'Your job is not feeding the family'. It's not a job, not a real job. To do and be involved in any of these things is to be different. The last 10 years or so has seen a considerable shift in thinking and attitude towards this.

In the seventies there was an excellent bookshop called the Dateline bookshop. It was in an arcade and just a few metres further along was a record store that belonged to Bob Miles, my former teacher. The record store was called Mainstream records. While I could never afford to buy books, nor did I have a record player to play records, I enjoyed just walking

in to these two stores and browsing, reading the blurbs of books and the jackets of record covers. In the record shop I discovered music that was 'alien' to me. Classical music was like another language! But through Bob's guidance and encouragement I began to slowly appreciate it and if he was in the shop, he would play me pieces with commentary on the composer and the different movements and what they meant. I was introduced to Mozart, Beethoven and Bach. That was just the beginning.

Similarly, with the bookstore I discovered new writers. At high school I spent much of my free time in the library. At that time, it was a wonderful library and my love of literature and reading grew from there. So, to then have a bookstore in Suva was wonderful! One day, an aunt of mine gave me \$20. That was big money then and I couldn't believe my luck to be given this amount. I headed straight for the Dateline bookshop. I wanted to buy a book. This was the first time I bought a book and it was exhilarating! I began browsing and there were so many choices and at the back of my mind I kept telling myself, 'you have money to buy a book'. And then I came upon *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. It was a massive book, over 1,500 pages and at the age of 19 what did I know about history, even more so of revolutions or Napoleonic wars? I read the blurb and it just fascinated me. I remember thinking if I read this, I will learn something, something new about a country and her history. Russia? What did I know about Russia? What did I know about Napoleon?

I checked the price and it was \$9.95. Half my money would be gone. I made the huge decision to purchase the book and happily headed home. When I told my dear mother I had bought the book the first thing she asked was how much was it? When I told her, she was very upset that I would spend so much money on a book! She didn't have to tell me that I should have spent the money on more important things like food. She was very disappointed. I still remember that scene very vividly. Normally I would feel guilty, but somehow, in this case I didn't. The \$9.95 didn't fill my belly, it fed my intellect and agitated my interest in the world of literature.

When I began to read the novel I couldn't put it down, and while the world Tolstoy writes about and describes was completely alien to me I still 'understood' the story and I was just so amazed that a writer could do that, tell you a story about a different world, a different culture, a different period in time, yet the story could still resonate with me and as young as I was then, reading the book in my small flat in Derrick Street, Raiwaqa,

I learnt about Russia and the Russian aristocracy and most importantly I became a fan of Leo Tolstoy and later the Russian writers. It was so thrilling and exhilarating. I remember cooking and kept forgetting that the pot was on the stove, getting annoyed that I had to stop reading and attend to the pot!

The Suva city I remember was a picture postcard: clean, few cars, well-dressed people walking around. By the market and bus station, the busiest place in town, a lone policeman in his black and white uniform, stood on a raised platform controlling the traffic. I don't recall any traffic lights then. It is hard to imagine that the bus fare then was under 10 cents! The evolution of the city began to take place with the increase in commerce and commercial activities but also with an increase in the population. Old buildings were taken down and replaced with ugly ones. Whoever was working on the design and planning of Suva was clearly someone who had no sense of aesthetics and lacked any understanding of design or how to maximise the use space of the beautiful peninsula. Having lived and grown up in Suva my whole life, I look back now, and sometimes when I am walking through the city I imagine watching scenes in a black and white movie, in slow motion, seeing the variations of change that have occurred and while I don't want to lament the past, I do miss a certain *joie de vivre*.

The political turmoil of 1987 was traumatic. 'The way the world should be' was no longer the way it was. The coup had a major economic effect not only on the country but on individuals as well. I was about to land a temporary job when the coup happened. For most of that year I was unemployed. Fortunately, I still lived in Derrick Street where the rent was very low. Despite the political situation I managed to still direct a play, a musical called *Runaways* that was about young people who had run away from home and were living on the streets. The musical was almost a metaphor for what was going on in the country. No sooner had rehearsals started than the second coup took place and soon after a curfew was imposed. A major decision had to be made.

The cast of predominantly young people were too enthusiastic to not put the show on and we decided to continue and work within the curfew hours. The curfew (if I recall) was from 8 pm. Rehearsals began at 5 and finished at 7, allowing people to get home in time. It was decided that the performances would also be from 5 pm. The day before the show opened the curfew was lifted. It was too late to change the time. The show must go on!

1987 was a transformative year. It was the year I became 'politicised', as I am sure happened to many others in the country, trying to understand and make sense of what happened and why the coup(s) happened. The protest marches and the eventual riots removed the safety of the city. We looked at each other differently, it just wasn't the same anymore and people didn't feel safe. Nothing was as straightforward as before. What I saw and heard around me was not pleasant. Suddenly the political landscape had not only shifted it had changed. A great deal of repressed feelings and anxiety came to the surface. The multiracial and 'smiling' Fiji had 'come of age'.

Our transition to Independence was very smooth and one feature that endeared everyone looking in from the outside was Fiji's multiracialism and she prided herself on that. Sometimes we wear our multiracialism on our sleeves because we need that identity to affirm our distinctiveness, that our way of life is different from the rest of the world. Perhaps we try a little too hard? Perhaps to reflect an ideal that we think exists? But then perhaps the effort becomes a little too much, and in earnest things fall apart. But in spite of the political upheavals, over the last three decades we've proven to be quite resilient and where we are now is a testament to that resilience.

I learnt not to be afraid of the dark. I walked the streets at night, unafraid. This is not bravado, rather confidence that has stood me well anywhere in the country especially in the housing estates, squatter settlements and places that may be less frequented by nonresidents. Any time I go to Raiwaqa or other similar housing estates, it is all familiar territory. I feel at home, undaunted, comfortable and safe.

There was no financial support other than the Fiji Arts Club providing funds to stage a play. Revenue from ticket sales went back to the club. Often the actors were unemployed or worked in jobs with very low pay. I eventually summoned up the courage to produce and direct my play *Just Another Day*. While I had given the play to a few people to read, I really hadn't received any critical comments. It would have been great to get feedback from someone who taught theatre or a dramaturg. However, the comments I had received earlier from my friends were encouraging and I did work on some of the comments. One of them was from Bob Miles, my former English teacher. What I appreciated was that he didn't try and correct the grammar as he could clearly see that this was Fiji English and it fitted the context of the play. He did however mention that I needed to be careful about the excessive swearing and use of the four-letter word in

the play. Too much swearing would undermine the essence of the play and take away the seriousness of it. I took heed of his comments and removed the swear words, replacing them with more 'suitable' words.

I realised very early on that I can't just transfer what I hear on the streets straight onto the page. Well, I could but I had to moderate it somehow. I was trying to write realism without fully understanding the genre at that time. I mean I was 19 and hadn't completed high school! Eight years later, at the age of 27, I directed the play. I was excited although very nervous of how it would be received. More so, it was revealing aspects of life in Suva, specifically, a low-cost housing estate. It could be anywhere. But somehow most people, locals at least, knew right away that it was Raiwaqa. An expatriate woman who was helping backstage with the production asked me if this was 'real', if a place such as the one I have depicted really does exist in Suva? I said, yes, very much so. This was the 'scene' that I knew very well. These were experiences that I had lived through, the characters were based on people who were my neighbours and friends. For her it was a revelation, it gave her an insight into a life, a place she had been living in for a few years now, but knew nothing about.

The consequence of writing in 'obscurity' is like walking in the wilderness. I just wrote as I felt, describing what I saw and my feelings about things. I realised around then that I enjoyed this writing but felt I didn't have the qualifications to be a writer. When you live and grow up in a place like Raiwaqa there is often no one around who could be a role model. There is no one around to encourage and support you, no one to give you books to read and while there were other writers around, who were at the University of the South Pacific, I was too daunted to approach them. I worked alone for the most part, teaching myself what I needed and remembering all that I had learnt in the seventies and early eighties when the Playhouse was a hive of activity with people who were struggling (with no support for the arts) yet enjoyed doing theatre, purely out of love and joy!

If success could be measured by positive responses then perhaps, I could say that *Just Another Day* was a success. For those not familiar with life in the housing estates, the play allowed people a glimpse into a life they only heard or read about, it provided scenes into life in a low-cost working-class area. It was a novelty and that revelation appeared unreal. Do people really live like that? For those living in the estates, this was an all too familiar scene, except this time they saw their own lives reflected back at them, mirroring their own reality and sometimes that reality can be uncomfortable.

Just past the Raiwaqa post office one enters the very well-known area called 'Jittu Estate'. This was and still is largely a squatter settlement, which at one time was quite overpopulated with a reputation that went with it. I had on a few occasions visited people living there and after *Just Another Day* I knew I had to write about the squatter settlement. I won't go into the details of the genesis of it, suffice to say that my next play *Outcasts* was set in a squatter settlement and most people assumed that it was Jittu Estate. They were right.

The stage at the Playhouse was transformed into a squatter neighbourhood right up to a tap with running water in the middle of the stage. It was, at that time, the biggest production I had ever directed and with a large cast to boot. Writing this play almost 10 years after *Just Another Day* was a new experience in writing. I was much older, I had been abroad, seen quite a bit of theatre, and read much more. There were features I had to consider: structure, plot and character. This time I had a small electric typewriter!

In May 1988, I was invited to be part of a group to perform skits at Sukuna Park. It was to be part of a larger protest group and on Saturday at 10 am on 14 May we assembled at Sukuna Park. We were all dressed in black. This was exactly a year after the military coup of 1987. I think we were all quite nervous but, as the saying goes, there was safety in numbers. No sooner had we congregated than the police came and told us to leave. They said it wasn't safe as the Taukei Movement was marching to Sukuna Park and if we remained there would be trouble. The Taukei Movement was formed in 1987 as a protest against the Labour Party-led coalition that had won the elections that year and were the new government. While the prime minister, Dr Timoci Bavadra, was an indigenous person, there were those that felt he was just a front as the majority of the government were Indo-Fijians. The Taukei Movement was very visible and vocal in the weeks leading up to the coup.

Meanwhile, we decided to remain and the singing began, a crowd had begun to gather to watch. We were encouraged and our confidence boosted as our singing gathered momentum. No sooner did that happen than we were arrested and all I can recall was the senior police officer (I gathered as much since he seemed to be calling the shots) shouted out to arrest all those who were dressed in black. I was wearing black jeans and t-shirt. So, the nearest 18 people dressed in black were hauled into police vans and driven to the Central Police Station. It was the first time in my life to be arrested and the first time to be part of such a protest.

We were kept overnight at the Central Police Station in Suva and released the next day. I won't go into the details of that, as that requires a separate story on its own. But it was quite a life-changing experience and the 18 of us who were arrested have remained lifelong friends – sadly quite a few have passed on, may they rest in peace. I returned home to Raiwaqa, to an empty flat. My sister, who was living with me at the time, was fortunately in Perth, Australia, so there was no one to worry about me. Raiwaqa was quiet and people were either in church or preparing lunch. The reaction from the neighbourhood was mixed. The general response was I should not have participated, it was not good. People didn't really want to talk about it. Not long after that I was prevented from leaving the country when I had to go to Nauru on a work-related mission. The immigration officer at Nadi Airport asked me, 'what have you done?' I said, 'what do you mean?' He looked at me a little embarrassed and said, 'sorry but you can't leave country, you have a mark against your name'.

There comes a time when major decisions have to be made and one of those was having to leave Raiwaqa. I was okay but I had to think of my young teenage sister. Raiwaqa, again at that time, just wasn't safe. In a carrier and in just one trip, we moved our small pile of belongings out of a house that I had grown up in, a house that was a part of me, where I had spent my most formative years, out of a street where I ran up and down, falling and getting up again, a street where we played games and sat under the lamppost telling stories and laughing late into the night, and out of a place, a place that I have loved all my life and that had become an ingrained part of me.

Raiwaqa was seminal in my life. It just wasn't a place where I lived and grew up. Yes, we are influenced by our environment but Raiwaqa was much more than that, more than just a place, it was where I discovered life, where I learnt not to be afraid. It was there that I first went abroad, where I wrote my first play, where I first read *War and Peace*, it was there that I became politicised and arrested, where I discovered acting, it was there where two of the most important people in my life died, my mother and grandmother, it was where I lived with an aunt who removed my bad habits and taught me independence, and it was there where I discovered the Playhouse. And it was in Raiwaqa where I knew what I really wanted to be in life.

This text is taken from *Suva Stories: A History of the Capital of Fiji*,  
edited by Nicholas Halter, published 2022, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.16](https://doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.16)