

## Extra chapters for

### *Culture in a Small Country: The Arts in New Zealand*

#### 1. Theatre

Theatre in the European tradition – the live performance of drama – was brought to New Zealand in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it faced fierce competition from radio, film, and television, and was sometimes viewed as heading for extinction, but the art-form has not only survived but continued to grow. The creative history of New Zealand theatre parallels the history of the other arts in many respects, but in terms of the presentation of local material, it is today in a healthier state than most creative areas. It is still difficult for playwrights to sustain a career, but theatre now has the advantage of providing a live alternative to the virtual world of the internet.

#### Slow development

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, ‘Melodramas, farces and light comedies were the favourites, but the players were ready to try their hands at anything from Shakespeare to pantomime.’<sup>2</sup> British influence dominated, though Australian companies also toured, and there was occasionally popular material from the United States. Visits by British companies were major cultural events, as shown by reports such as this: ‘The greatest Shakespearean actor of his time, Laurence Olivier, and his wife and co-star Vivien Leigh, created a minor sensation when they landed at Paraparaumu airport, north of Wellington, in 1948. They were on a nationwide tour of New Zealand with their London-based company, the Old Vic. It was the first time a theatre company had toured New Zealand entirely by aircraft. Five planes were used to transport the cast, props and scenery of their production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*.’<sup>3</sup> The repertoire of local, amateur drama groups around this time was ‘a mixture of West End comedies and melodramas, the plays of Barrie, Galsworthy, Shaw, and Wilde, leavened with an occasional Ibsen and a few Shakespearean productions.’<sup>4</sup>

British influence was so strong that ‘Received pronunciation was essential for any actor....’ John Smythe encountered that requirement in the 1960s:

Davinia Whitehouse who, when I mentioned my intention to pursue a professional career, exclaimed in her inimitable Bracknellian tones that I could never be a professional... “Because of your New Zealand accent!” And of course she was right. “Speech and drama” were indivisible in those days, and “elocution”...was synonymous with speech.... Our chronic discomfort with our own voices betrayed a deep-set cultural cringe that has undoubtedly influenced the evolution of our own professional theatre.<sup>5</sup>

At a meeting of Wellington theatre people in 1974, when Mervyn Thompson spoke of the need to present more local plays, his comments created ‘fear’ among many actors: ‘For those imbued with

“voice beautiful” values, the spectre of more New Zealand plays was...a threat.’<sup>6</sup> Theatre director Tony Taylor expressed the frustration felt by those struggling to create local drama when he wondered (in 1978) why so many potential audience members stayed ‘at home waiting for some has-been British actor to come in some has-been West End play.’<sup>7</sup>

What, then, of local writing? ‘In the 19th century New Zealand plays were in the main indifferent copies of overseas favourites, either sensational dramas or sentimental pieces....’<sup>8</sup> The production of local drama increased in the 1930s in support of political activism and/or critical nationalism. Yet overall change was slow because this was an expensive art form. Local customers tended to have high expectations because they were accustomed to lavish forms of film (and later television) production. Nevertheless, the country has had many drama groups able to make impressive use of limited resources. Good theatre depended on skilled writers, actors, directors, dramaturges, set designers, makers of costumes and props, choreographers, and composers, among others. There were also the costs of publicity and the hire of a venue large enough to hold a sizeable paying audience. For a theatre culture to develop, there also needed to be organizations that looked after the rights and revenue of writers and were able to publish or circulate scripts.

In general, theatre could not develop far without subsidy, and in our culture there has always been opposition to the idea of public support from people who view drama as merely a ‘chosen hobby.’ For example Bob Jones (a champion of neo-liberal politics) wrote in 1982: ‘What they [theatre people] are saying is that if we don’t pay to watch them perform then we should be compelled to pay them to do so anyway. Their arguments are illogical, untenable and even reprehensible. They are parasites, far more so than any welfare bludgers abusing the system.... There is absolutely nothing more uplifting in the existence of a professional theatre than in the existence of a badminton club....’<sup>9</sup> Pioneer playwright Bruce Mason argued in reply that ‘everybody paid taxes for things they might not use directly’ and pointed out that ‘sport received more than three times the [government funding] allocated to the arts and crafts.’<sup>10</sup>

The high cost, limited funding, and the public’s lack of confidence in local material ensured that even the critical nationalist movement had only a very limited theatre dimension. There were, however, some major poets who wrote plays, including R A K Mason, Allen Curnow and James K Baxter, along with novelist Frank Sargeson. Curnow took as his model the campaign by the poet W B Yeats to develop Irish theatre. Plays by New Zealand poets were well suited to radio presentation, and in the early years that became an important outlet for drama. Unity Theatre, founded in Wellington in 1942, produced left-wing political plays. In the 1950s the most influential figure was Bruce Mason, who played a pioneering role for theatre similar to that performed in film-making by John O’Shea. Both had a commitment to biculturalism that was far ahead of its time. Mason’s plays included *The Pohutukawa Tree* (1957) and *Awatea* (1969), but his best-known work is *The End of the Golden Weather* (1959), a great example of the old New Zealand tradition of the solo play. As Mason said: ‘I’d come to the end of my tether attempting to earn my living by writing and acting. How was one to make one’s living...? Well, the Kiwi way is to do it all by yourself....’<sup>11</sup>

There were other daring attempts in the 1950s to establish a locally-oriented theatre scene. In 1952, Richard and Edith Campion (parents of film director Jane Campion) created a professional company, The New Zealand Players. It toured until 1960, presenting approximately 30 plays of which five were

by local writers (including two by Mason). Another touring group, active from 1952 to 1960, was the Community Arts Service (CAS) which presented Curnow's *Moon Section*. As Murray Edmond observes, up to 1964 'all professional theatre in New Zealand was "on the road."'12 The musical equivalent was the Alex Lindsay String Orchestra, active from 1948 to 1963, which championed the work of New Zealand composers. All such groups struggled to survive. Lindsay, for example, 'found the financial rewards...inadequate to support a large family....'13 Smythe remembers that Richard Champion's 'fall-back position when the New Zealand Players ran out of money' was to work as an English teacher.<sup>14</sup> One of the disasters of the decade involved Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, taken on a tour of 'the country-town circuit' by Ronald Barker in 1958. The *Godot* tour 'is credited with "breaking the back" of the CAS. If this was modern theatre, those audiences wanted no part of it.'<sup>15</sup>

### **New styles of local theatre**

Like the other arts, New Zealand theatre was galvanised by a burst of new energies in the 1960s and '70s. Indeed, this happened in theatre earlier than in film-making, surfacing in the early '60s. Just as the New Wave of European directors was helping to inspire young New Zealanders drawn to film, so European Absurd drama – the plays of writers such as Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet – had a huge impact on newcomers to theatre, as did the work of Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and Jean-Paul Sartre. And there were many other overseas innovations such as Jerzy Grotowski's work in Poland (from 1957), Jacques Lecoq's school of mime in France (from 1956), the Living Theatre (in the USA from 1947), the San Francisco Mime Troupe (from 1959), and 'happenings' and movements such as COBRA and Fluxus in the visual arts. They hugely expanded the possibilities of live performance and helped to inform the 1960s counter-cultures.

Roger Hall has described the establishment of Downstage Theatre in Wellington in 1964 as 'probably the most significant single moment in New Zealand Theatre history' because it 'opened at a time when current opinion was that it was impossible for New Zealand to support a professional theatre.'<sup>16</sup> Downstage began with a strong commitment both to the new European drama and to New Zealand material. The latter consisted initially of work by Alexander Guyan, Michael Noonan, Peter Bland and Martyn Sanderson. Sanderson was adamant that Downstage needed to embrace the '60s spirit and 'to avoid Museum Theatre, Academy Theatre, Corporation Theatre, Glamour Theatre.'<sup>17</sup>

A great deal of infrastructure was established. The Globe Theatre, which had been created in Dunedin in 1961, presented plays by James K Baxter. The Mercury opened in Auckland in 1967. A drama school, Toi Whakaari, was established in 1970. A playwrights' organization, Playmarket, was established in 1973, and the decade saw other theatres emerge around the country – the Four Seasons (Whanganui) in 1970; Court (Christchurch) in 1971; Fortune (Dunedin), Centrepoint (Palmerston North), the New Independent Theatre (Auckland), and Theatre Corporate (Auckland), all in 1974; Circa (Wellington) and Gateway (Tauranga) in 1975; and BATS (Wellington) in 1979.

In the spirit of Sanderson's call for theatre that was 'immediate [and] exploratory,' there was a surge of experimental groups. They were not tied to a physical theatre, although they might sometimes perform at a venue like Downstage. They included Living Theatre (established by Ken Rea in 1970), Amamus (by Paul Maunder in 1971), Theatre Action (by Francis Batten in 1971), Red Mole (by Alan Brunton and Sally Rodwell in 1974), and Free Theatre (by Peter Falkenberg in 1979). Their performances were group creations which drew on 'dance, mime, voice, acrobatics or circus techniques.'<sup>18</sup> They sought to transform drama by questioning every aspect, including the roles of writer, actor, director and audience. Those in Auckland and Wellington had creative links with other avant-garde activities in poetry, music and film. Grotowski made a brief but inspiring visit to New Zealand in 1973. This new local work was effectively a rejection of the critical nationalist tradition in favour of 'recent international trends.' Audiences were small but the groups represented an explosion of new energy.<sup>19</sup>

Their activities continued for a few years and then the artists involved left New Zealand, embraced other media, or shifted to a less public, grass-roots context. Only Free Theatre in Christchurch maintained the same trajectory, and the group is still active today after four decades, operating at the opposite extreme to the Court (the city's repertory theatre). Like the burst of post-object art in the 1970s, the work of these unorthodox groups anticipated later developments, but except in Christchurch they have been largely forgotten. The theatrical activity that remained was more traditional in character, though – as Edmond has documented – some traces of its anarchic, imagistic, or *Commedia dell'arte* spirit survived in the work of performers such as Front Lawn, Inside Out, Blertha, Warwick Broadhead, and Douglas Wright.

Meanwhile there was a wave of plays which used familiar genres but gave them a New Zealand slant, and local theatre-goers were now ready to respond. This was the period when Britain cut its colonial ties and the arts were energised by a new confidence in both high culture and popular culture. In the cinema there were feature-films which revealed (or created) a range of new audiences, and the comparable breakthrough plays included *Glide Time* (1976), *Middle Age Spread* (1977), *Foreskin's Lament* (1980), *Setting the Table* (1981), *Ladies' Night* (1987), *Squatter* (1987) and *Waiora* (1996). They held a great novelty value and sense of discovery for their first audiences.

### **The success of comedy**

The potential for local comedy was signalled at Downstage in 1975 by Joe Musaphia's *Mothers and Fathers*, but the confirmation came the following year at Circa when Roger Hall's *Glide Time* opened. 'Audiences would begin laughing before the play began. They took their seats and saw the set: the cramped office, the radiators, the Government Life calendars on the wall. This was a world they all knew, and they laughed because of the joy of recognition.'<sup>20</sup> Actor Ross Jolly remembers: 'I delivered the first line of the play, "Wellington I hate you," and there would be a half-second pause and then this great wave, this physical wave of laughter, and I'd think "Wow...this is extraordinary, I don't know what's going on here!" And, well, what was going on was Roger Hall – Roger's ability to put his finger on Kiwi things.'<sup>21</sup> Hall had developed his comedy skills in the 1960s by writing and acting in university capping shows and Downstage revues. Among his hits were wicked impressions of Keith Holyoake as Governor-General. Comedian John Clark noted that 'Roger was always looking at people

in the audience. He had a high regard for the audience. He knew they were the engine room of the whole thing.’<sup>22</sup>

*Glide Time* was followed by another huge hit, *Middle Age Spread*. Mike Nicolaidi observed: ‘New Zealand theatre has long yearned for a playwright that could put a finger on the pulse of our essentially conservative middle class existence. Hall has found this pulse and knows how to play it with confidence.’<sup>23</sup> Actor Grant Tilly comments that Hall’s subsequent plays have shown again and again that ‘His ear is attuned to what’s in the air at the moment, or what could be in the air, so by the time he’s written the play, whatever he’s talking about is current. Like lifestyle blocks or little boutique wineries, for example, which are part of what *Spreading Out* is about.’<sup>24</sup> Among many other examples, his two comedies about the stock-buying craze during the peak of Rogernomics – *The Share Club* (in June 1987) and *After the Crash* (in November 1988) – anticipated and then closely followed the share-market melt-down of October 1987. As Hall has explained his approach: ‘What we tend to think as a sort of personal, peculiar thing to us, almost inevitably turns out to be what everyone else thinks and experiences. So that they become what I call “elbow nudges.” Couples in the audience are nudging each other and saying “My God, this is us, and how does he know!” I think by being honest about myself in a way...I find that I’m just the same as everybody else. And Woody Allen says humour is letting the audience know that they’re not alone.’<sup>25</sup>

Hall has continued to write a play a year for over 40 years and their popularity has been crucial to the survival of many New Zealand theatres. Indeed, it is hard to think of a writer in film or literature who has had such sustained popular success. In 2006 he remarked: ‘I find it very satisfying that to think when I started writing plays every theatre would put “a New Zealand play” on the billboard, as I say cynically, as if it was a government health warning, and now they don’t do that.... Many theatres this year I think are doing more New Zealand plays than any other and there’s no comment about it. It is accepted as normal. And that’s a lot of progress in 25 years or so.’<sup>26</sup> *Glide Time* also generated two local television series, while *Middle Age Spread* became a feature-film, and Hall produced an English version of the play for the West End which won a major award. He has been extremely generous with his success, contributing to the infrastructure of the arts such as his work for the Arts Foundation and his 2018 organizing of the first New Zealand Theatre Month.

Opening up a vein of local comedy which attracted a middle-class audience was, however, not the vision of local theatre championed by pioneers such as Sanderson. Jolly says: ‘The accolades tend to go to things that have lots of *sturm und drang*. Somebody dies, oh yes that’s drama. People are suspicious of Roger’s commercial success, it’s pleasing too many people so there must be something wrong with it. I think it’s a mind-set that comedy is a lesser beast.’<sup>27</sup>

### ***Foreskin’s Lament***

In 1980, a play which did culminate in a death created another sensation – *Foreskin’s Lament* by Greg McGee, who had been involved at high levels of rugby but had lost sympathy for the culture surrounding the sport. His play represented a sharp break with the middle-class preoccupations of recent drama. The staging had a raw immediacy, involving even a strong smell of liniment in its rugby changing room scenes.<sup>28</sup>

Alison Quigan, a member of the cast for the first (Theatre Corporate) production, remembers being hugely struck during rehearsals by the dialogue: 'It was so familiar but I had never heard it on stage. They were using words that our fathers and brothers used.... I felt I knew these people. I was speaking my own language, it was just ground-breaking.... Foreskin's "Whaddarya?" speech created the most electric feeling. That play was a turning-point, it made us connect with ourselves.'<sup>29</sup> Raymond Hawthorne, who had served as dramaturge, also commented on the ending: 'I couldn't believe the last soliloquy.... It was awful, awe-full (in its true sense), and the stunned nature of the audience on the opening night was extraordinary. And then of course there was an eruption. The play was a landmark, it was magic, it was the big breakthrough for the country in language and ideas, attacking the holy cow.'<sup>30</sup>

In the autobiography he wrote later, McGee remembered that English lessons at his school in the mid-'60s had been limited to 'playwrights and authors who were either dead or overseas.'<sup>31</sup> He added: 'I wanted to find out whether the success [of *Foreskin's Lament*] would give me a shot at ...something which at that time in New Zealand was even more exacting and rigorous and ambitious than being an All Black...I wanted to see whether I could earn a living from writing.'<sup>32</sup> He had two more plays successfully staged in 1984, *Tooth and Claw* and *Out in the Cold*. Together with other local writers who were then having their first plays produced, McGee felt he was part of 'a golden age for New Zealand theatre.' But this period also involved a great deal of conflict because 'the theatres were accustomed to performing plays written by people who were overseas or dead, they were not used to having extant playwrights turn up at rehearsal to express opinions about matters like direction and casting.'<sup>33</sup>

Theatres had to develop equitable contracts for writers, and writers had to become 'accustomed to the realities of production: the terrible choices and compromises that needed to be made.'<sup>34</sup> For those who had established the local theatres, after years of training in England, this was not an easy adjustment as they felt they 'had given birth to professional theatre in this country and now these Johnny-come-lately indigenous playwrights were trying to tell them what they could and couldn't do within their own fiefdoms.'<sup>35</sup> McGee took part in the establishment of Working Title Theatre as an alternative company, but after a financial disaster with his play *Whiteman* in 1986, he transferred his creative energies to television, becoming the best-known local script-writer.

### **Local theatre expands**

The plays of Mervyn Thompson, who had directed the workshop performance of *Foreskin's Lament*, brought new areas of local life to the stage. He said: 'I became convinced there had long existed a plot to deprive New Zealanders of their own past. A sense of history is a basic human need.'<sup>36</sup> Thompson had left school at the age of 15 and worked for five years as a coal miner before becoming a university student. In 1971 he was one of the founders of Court Theatre in Christchurch. In his own plays he applied Brechtian techniques to local themes that included Uncle Scrim, mining, the temperance movement, the popular weekly scandal paper *Truth*, horse racing and betting, and pakeha land courts.

As he described the response to his play *O! Temperance!*: ‘The greatest joy it provided was ultimately the joy of recognition. “This is us! This is ours!” the audiences would say. If a play is doing its job properly that is what they will *always* say.... That this seldom happens on New Zealand stages is evidence of an unhappy tendency in our land: the cultured...are too often alienated, cut off from the mainstreams of New Zealand life.’<sup>37</sup> Thompson’s non-naturalistic approach and his political views were often controversial, but his work as writer and director enlarged the audience for thought-provoking local theatre.<sup>38</sup> He directed the first performance of many plays, including Stuart Hoar’s *Squatter*, a re-examination of Canterbury society in 1894 which offered a striking, post-colonial vision of the country’s history.

Between 1964 and 1984, Downstage mounted 217 mainbill productions, of which 24 percent were homegrown. This was an exceptionally high proportion for a local theatre at that time, but other theatres were gradually catching up. There was a series of popular successes. For example, by mid-1992, *The Share Club* had sold 53,492 tickets, *Footrot Flats* (a 1983 musical by Roger Hall, with songs by Philip Norman and A K Grant) 63,861 tickets, *Foreskin’s Lament* 93,393 tickets, and *Ladies’ Night* (a 1987 comedy by Stephen Sinclair and Anthony McCarten) 136,142 tickets.<sup>39</sup> Few local novels or films had attracted audiences of that size. In a 2001 interview, even Elric Hooper, well-known as a champion of classic theatre, said that ‘when he first became Director of the Court [Theatre], New Zealand plays were “box office poison,”’ but ‘Now, New Zealand plays, particularly the comedies, are the money makers for the theatre.’ He saw them as helping to subsidise Shakespeare productions, rather than vice versa, as had previously been the case.<sup>40</sup> At that time Hooper saw the ideal repertoire as one-third overseas classics, one third outstanding contemporary plays from overseas, and one-third local plays.

### **The on-going issue of survival**

Despite its growth, theatre remained financially fragile. In 1989, as Artistic Director of Downstage, Colin McColl said he knew that ‘two box office flops [in a row] can leave a theatre facing bankruptcy.’<sup>41</sup> This principle still operates today. In 2014, Shane Boshier, as Artistic Director of Silo, explained to an interviewer that ‘whenever he selects a portfolio of programming he always tries to balance riskier propositions with pieces of work that he knows an artist or an audience are going to respond to. That’s how [the theatre has] remained sustainable.’<sup>42</sup> Over the years, many professional theatre companies have collapsed. Stuart Hoar recalls how the growth of confidence and infrastructure during the ‘70s and ‘80s was interrupted by the collapse of the Mercury Theatre in Auckland in 1992, and that gave a strong sense of insecurity to the remaining theatres.

Recent losses include Downstage in Wellington in 2013 and the Fortune in Dunedin in 2018. Before its demise, Downstage had often been ‘trading on empty’ and had ‘avoided liquidation only through the continued support of patient creditors.’<sup>43</sup> Centrepoin Theatre, active in Palmerston North for 44 years, is the last regional theatre still operating on a professional basis, and today it is ‘fighting to keep its head above water.’ Its general manager, Kate Louise Elliot says that after the closing of the Fortune, ‘People in the community have been asking me, “Will that happen here? Could we wake up one morning and hear that?” I tell them, “Absolutely! We are always only two shows away from closing.”’ While Centrepoin ‘has the advantage and asset buffer of owning their own buildings,’ as

‘the only theatre in the country to own their own property,’ the company ‘can’t fix or refurbish anything, because we can’t afford to.’<sup>44</sup>

Every professional theatre must continue to devote a great deal of its energy to the search for sponsors. Creative NZ funding remains a crucial ingredient. The trend has been for many companies not to seek to have their own theatre and permanent staff but to maintain an ad hoc approach. Yet a resident company is likely to be in a better position to offer training and build up a stock of equipment, props, and expertise. There has been a long-running campaign for a ‘national theatre,’ similar to the national theatres of Wales and Scotland. While this would no doubt be based in Auckland or Wellington, it could regularly tour the country, as the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra or the Royal New Zealand Ballet do. Some theatre people are sceptical of the basic idea because they fear it would encourage conservative programming, and – like Te Papa or the NZSO – consume too large a share of public funding.<sup>45</sup> But others such as Hoar continue to argue that the arts remain seriously under-funded and are too dependent on an ad hoc, short term approach.

Earning a living remains a challenge for free-lance actors. Smythe reports that ‘Joe Mustaphia likened an actor’s career to a three-legged stool, supported by radio, TV and theatre: “Take away one of those legs and the whole stool goes.”’<sup>46</sup> Radio drama, once a major genre, has declined, and the others are uncertain sources of work. It was a serious blow for Wellington actors in 1980 when TVNZ began to move its production north to Auckland. For that reason, and because a series of new theatres have been built, Auckland has become the largest drama centre, though companies struggle with the cost of hiring a venue such as Q or the ASB Waterfront Theatre.<sup>47</sup> To generate additional income, theatres have always sought to run a restaurant, café or bar, and Ian Mune recalls that when he started working at Downstage in 1984, ‘Apart from acting, my tasks involved table-waiting, washing dishes, collecting desserts from the baker, selling tickets, designing sets, building sets, doing posters and general publicity.’<sup>48</sup>

Hall appears to be the only playwright who has managed to make a living from his work. Even a busy, successful playwright such as Hoar feels that at best he has made ‘about half a living.’ Television has provided an important supplement for writers such as Dave Armstrong, author of plays such as *Niu Sila*, who script-edited the series *Bro’Town*. Others seek additional income from radio, novels, PR or advertising work. Teaching is a frequent option. An important development has been the inclusion of New Zealand plays in the secondary school drama curriculum, thanks to lobbying from teachers such as Susan Battye (who has also been a playwright and the founding president of Drama New Zealand). This means that now around half of the NCEA prescribed list of playwrights (from Euripides to Renée) are local writers. As Feilding High School drama teacher Karla Haronga says: ‘Once we got into the 2000s, New Zealand plays really came into their own.’<sup>49</sup>

Some universities have offered residencies for writers, and have created influential theatre programmes. Yet there are still academics who have not caught up with the developments in local drama. Hall has found that drama is often regarded as ‘a lowly sub-branch of literature, not up at the top table.’<sup>50</sup> In 1989 and 1990 when he organised New Zealand Writers’ Week at the University of Otago, including playwrights such as John Broughton and Mervyn Thompson, he was shocked that ‘While many people were willing to travel from a long way to attend [the event], most of the English Department couldn’t even bother to cross the campus.’ Hall ‘let rip’ with a letter to the Department in which he ‘reminded teachers and lecturers that they live off writers and at a much better rate than most.’<sup>51</sup>



Hall also commented in 2018 that ‘Fewer and fewer plays are being reviewed, no museum in the country gives any space to theatre and we’re forever reading about how well New Zealand novels do, but how often do we hear about New Zealand plays?’ In 2013, Murray Edmond pointed out that ‘The recent *Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature*, edited by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, included just twenty pages of dramatic writing out of 1,048 pages of selections. This staggering level of omission can actually be exceeded by Patrick Evans’s *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (1990), which failed to mention drama and dramatic writing at all.’<sup>52</sup>

A conspicuous problem for theatre, as for the other arts in New Zealand, is the tendency to emphasise ‘young and emerging artists’ and to abandon those in mid-career. The phrase ‘young and emerging’ is frequently used by Creative NZ. As one critic has pointed out, ‘There is a flaw in the terminology [which] implies that experimental work and young/emerging artists are the same thing. This is not the case and takes a narrow-minded view of what it means to be experimental.’<sup>53</sup>

Playwright Sam Brooks adds: ‘The idea that you get to a point in your career and it’s smooth sailing is not the reality. I’d argue that it actually gets harder – once you’re no longer “emerging” or “young,” all those avenues of mentorship and funding close up and the fresh smell of being new in your industry wears off... I think once we realise that [mid-career] artists are equally as worthy of support as those just emerging, the more robust our industry will be.’<sup>54</sup> In Edmond’s words: ‘Sustaining a career in New Zealand is difficult. Once no longer an HYT (hot young thing) it’s a long wait to become a PNT (precious national treasure).’<sup>55</sup>

### Women in theatre

Despite such drawbacks, there has been much overall growth in theatre. Running parallel to developments in the other arts, women have made an especially important contribution. They had always been involved in amateur theatre but men tended to dominate key acting roles and the activities of directing and playwriting. This reflected the male emphasis in society at large which was as pronounced in the arts as it was in business circles. A survey of Downstage in 1983 showed that the company had employed 52 male to 24 female actors. There was also a gender imbalance in writing and directing, and in the five year period from 1980 to the end of 1984 there were 38 plays written by men and only 5 by women, with 39 directed by men and only 4 by women.<sup>56</sup> And this was Downstage, a company considered highly progressive in other respects.

When the 1970s brought ‘second-wave feminism’ to New Zealand, there were innovations such as the Cure-All Ills All Star Travelling Women’s Medicine Show which toured New Zealand in 1975. It performed at professional theatres (including Downstage), conferences and feminist events. To quote *Te Ara*, ‘the troupe proved that when it came to theatre, women could do everything.’<sup>57</sup> The presence of women in theatre steadily increased, assisted by organizations such as the Magdalena Aotearoa Trust, founded in 1997 to encourage and promote the work of women in the performing arts, and three years later, the Women’s Professional Playwrights’ Association (or WOPPA), which staged an initial festival in 2000.

Since 1981 the playwright Renée [Taylor] has been an influential figure. She has described herself as ‘a lesbian feminist with socialist working-class ideals.’<sup>58</sup> Her plays include a trilogy about four generations of working-class women: *Wednesday to Come* (1985), *Pass it On* (1986) and *Jeannie Once* (1991). The many other women who have written notable plays include Hilary Beaton, Jean

Betts, Carolyn Burns, Sarah Dalahunty, Cathie Downes, Fiona Farrell, Kathleen Gallagher, Raewyn Gwilliam, Cherie Jacobson, Stephanie Johnson, Alex Lodge, Rachel McAlpine, Loraë Parry, Vivienne Plumb, Fiona Samuel, Rosie Scott, and Kate Winstanley. As an example of the increased prominence of women today, the 2017 Wellington Theatre Awards had a record number of female nominations in all areas.<sup>59</sup> Women were the winners in almost every category. 2018 is the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, and the year has been marked by a Women's Theatre Festival and a Women in Theatre Hui.

### **Māori involvement**

From the 1970s, the growth of Māori political activism inspired new developments in theatre. A series of Māori companies emerged in different parts of the country, including Te Ika a Maui Players (from 1976), Maranga Mai (circa 1979), Te Ohu Whakaari (1982), Taki Rua (1983), Te Rakau Hua O Te Wao Tapu (1990), He Ara Hou (1990), Tawata (2001), Ngakau Toa (2012) and Te Pou (2015). Their productions have transformed traditional stage procedures by drawing on 'poetic and musical modes of haka, karanga, waiata and karakia.'<sup>60</sup> In some cases the theatre has been conceived as a marae, in which tikanga (traditional practices) are observed and there are opportunities for the audience to respond through their own waiata or haka. European classics such as the plays of Shakespeare have been re-interpreted in the light of Māori concepts. For example, 'Adaptations of *Othello*, using a Māori cast and usually set during either the Musket Wars or New Zealand Land Wars of the nineteenth century, have been performed on numerous occasions since the late 1990s.'<sup>61</sup> Rawene Paratene directed Ngakau Toa in a much-discussed production of *Troilus and Cressida* at the Globe Theatre in London in 2012, and Don Selwyn created a film version of *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weneti (The Merchant of Venice)*. Both of those productions used te reo translations.

Many other writers have contributed to the growth of Māori theatre, including Broughton, Riwia Brown, Harry Dansey, Briar Grace-Jones, Rowley Habib, Rore Hapipi, Hone Kouka, Rena Owen, Roma Potiki, Bruce Stewart, Apirana Taylor and Hone Tuwhare. Closer links were established with the television and film industries, such as the establishment of Maori TV in 2004. Māori theatre has gone on to explore 'genres much wider than agitprop theatre and marae-based traditional stories.... Playwrights such as Albert Belz (*Awhi Tapu, Yours Truly, Te Karakia*) and Whiti Hereaka (*Fallow, Te Kaupoi, Raw Men*) have dealt with issues not previously seen as intrinsically Māori.'<sup>62</sup> This represented a new wave of experiment like the controversial exhibitions by young Māori visual artists in the 1990s.

Pacific Island (or Pasifika) culture has also produced striking new forms of drama which in some cases have gone on to become part of the mainstream. David O'Donnell argues that 'Pacific...migrants in New Zealand have created a unique diasporic theatre, exploring the impact of migration on the family and cultural institutions.'<sup>63</sup> Pasifika theatre companies have included Pacific Underground, Pacific Theatre, The Conch, No Limits, and Tulou Productions, and writers have included Tusiata Avia, David Fane, Erolia Ifopo, Oscar Kightley, John Kneubuhl, D.F. Mamea, Victor Rodger, Justine Simey-Barton, Aleni Tufuga and Albert Wendt.

Another of New Zealand's most successful and award-winning companies is Indian Ink, whose writers – Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis – have made a series of plays beginning with *Krishnan's Dairy*

in 1997 which explore the experience of Indians in New Zealand, though they are careful not to limit their work to that theme. Born in Malaysia, Rajan had moved to New Zealand with his Indian parents at the age of four. The company has toured extensively not only round the country but also overseas. This growing diversity is valuable not only for the social information it provides about migrant communities but also for the way it expands theatrical methods, for example through Indian Ink's stylised, magic realist approach and its imaginative use of masks and multiple role-playing.

### **The situation today**

Looking at the situation of theatre today is an opportunity to consider three changes which have proved important not only for theatre but for all the arts. The first is the extent to which identity politics has become a central influence. The second is the increasing diversity and fragmentation of the audience. The third is the shift of focus from the local to the global. And the fourth is the power of live performance in an era dominated by digital media. The interaction between these four elements has shaped today's theatre culture, and it is simultaneously transforming the other arts, albeit in divergent ways.

Because identity is a personal and cultural form of politics, it is a theme well suited to the medium of theatre. A play of this kind can draw upon community resources and attract those who respond to the theme. Echoing the 1960s feminist idea of 'the personal as the political,' such drama seeks to share the experience of a group, confront the mainstream with evidence of prejudice, and provoke each spectator to consider his or her own identity. Contemporary theatre has been greatly energised by these concerns, and Creative NZ supports them by calling for 'work that engages with new and/or diverse audiences.' Its 2015 *Review of Theatre* cites the complaint that too much local theatre appeals 'to urban, middle-class, middle-aged Pākehā,' in contrast to 'theatre that engages with and reflects more diverse communities, such as...Māori, Pasifika and Asian' along with disability groups and 'the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) communities.'<sup>64</sup>

Identity politics tends to regard gender, ethnic or sexual orientation as a more urgent issue than factors such as class. Class was previously the dominant concern of political plays, particularly those focusing on capitalism as the main source of social problems. Among theatre critics, almost all agree that the growth in diversity has been hugely important, but some are uneasy about what they see as a tendency to over-simplify politics by failing to understand identity as an intersection of many factors, including class. They are also concerned that a spirit of separatism may undercut the possibility of united political action, when the only allies that people trust are limited to members of their immediate group.<sup>65</sup>

From a theatrical point of view the danger lies in plays which concentrate (as Edmond says) 'on their identity creds but fail to get the wretched work of art up and running.'<sup>66</sup> A criticism more sweeping and more conservatively based is offered by Elric Hooper, who has championed the ideal of the established, resident company dedicated to a combination of 'classic' and 'great contemporary' theatre.<sup>67</sup> He is not impressed by ad hoc-style productions which he sees as having a political axe to grind. In 1995 he remarked: 'New Zealand, because it is bourgeois and frightened, loves rough theatre because it is an insurance against the guilt feeling of being comfortable.... We have an almost total alternative theatre. They talk about mainstream theatre, but we don't have one. We're so busy trying to shock ourselves.' Project-by-project funding allows the 'politically correct Arts Council' to

decide what New Zealanders should see. ‘You can do the most awful work as long as the Arts Council approves of its ethnic or sexual politics.’<sup>68</sup> He later commented: ‘The theatre may take on the moral obligation of doing “the right thing,” but the theatre is rarely at its best when it is consciously doing that.’<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, ‘rough theatre’ that explores identity issues has brought younger audiences and new energies to the theatre. An example which typifies the current approach was the 2018 Silo production of *Hir*, an American play in a style of ‘absurd realism’ about a dysfunctional family, with themes of feminism and transgender identity. In the words of local reviewer Nathan Joe: ‘This is a play for today, perfectly capturing the zeitgeist and reflecting the current paradigm shift in our still-evolving identity politics. What it lacks in subtlety it more than makes up for in urgency.’<sup>70</sup>

Another example is Proudly Asian Theatre, established in 2018 as a ‘theatre company dedicated to showcasing and creating work by local Asian playwrights.’<sup>71</sup> New Zealanders of Chinese ancestry now number more than 171,000.<sup>72</sup> An earlier Asian play was *White/Other* (2016), in which ‘Auckland-based actor [and playwright] Alice Canton is coming face-to-face with her Chinese and Pakeha identity in a new show at The Basement Theatre. *White/Other* sees Canton exploring both sides of her bi-cultural identity, which she says at times feel alien and uncomfortable.’<sup>73</sup>

Ethnic communities say that plays of this kind can give them a shock of recognition comparable to what was once the novelty value of *Glide Time* or *Foreskin’s Lament*. In describing the rehearsals at Q Theatre of the Chinese play *Orientation* (2018) which ‘explores the experiences of young Asians...in contemporary New Zealand,’ Dionne Christian reported that the actors felt very much at home with the characters in [Chye-Ling] Huang’s script, though they were ‘quick to add that it’s only one Asian story in a region teeming with tales waiting to be told.’<sup>74</sup> Renee Liang, the reviewer in the *Herald* who is from a Chinese family and herself a playwright, described *Orientation* as ‘a landmark’ because ‘this may be the first time in New Zealand that different Asian ethnicities have stood together as main characters.’<sup>75</sup>

### **A variety of audiences**

Today’s theatre audiences are highly fragmented, spread over a variety of different companies who cater to particular communities or sub-cultures. Older theatre people regret the loss of coherence; yet even back in 1985 Mervyn Thompson was commenting on it: ‘The people I thought were allies (women, Maoris, working-class people, even those who believe you can’t have a nation if you haven’t got a national drama) are no allies at all. They’re separate groups with separate agendas, screaming for each other’s blood. *There is no popular front!*’<sup>76</sup> Others have also become concerned about the lack of unity, and that was a motive for the campaign to organise a New Zealand Theatre Month in September 2018: ‘Hall says theatre organisations, focused on making work and staying within tight budgets, often don’t have time to come together and serve as a national voice or champion their own achievements.’<sup>77</sup>

There are ‘serious theatre buffs’ (in Edmond’s words) who go to a large number of plays ‘and watch each other closely.’ But that is a small group. The next most loyal audience are those aged 50+, who tend to prefer more orthodox plays, such as a Hall-style New Zealand comedy or a production by an

established repertory group. When they are not staying at home watching Netflix and other forms of television (now the main source of overseas drama), they may be drawn to a comfortable venue such as the ASB Waterfront Theatre which offers not only New Zealand plays but also local productions of West End or Broadway hits. Edmond comments: ‘When I go there, it’s the only time I can look around and feel young. (I also feel poor – which isn’t usually the case in theatre audiences.)’<sup>78</sup> Creative NZ continues to subsidise the main repertory theatres as well as more ad hoc projects. The fact that repertory theatres receive strong public funding generates fierce debate, though their supporters respond by emphasising the importance of high-end drama and the survival of professional companies.<sup>79</sup>

Towards the other end of the spectrum ‘there’s a quite trendy, sort of hip and rather tacky audience in their late 20s to early 40s – often in evidence in the Silo’s shows, for example.’<sup>80</sup> This audience for small Auckland theatres and plays at festivals tends to be adventurous and enthusiastic, but it is also fickle since there are now so many other entertainment and media options for young adults. For all age groups, the city’s many cafés and restaurants also function as competitors. As Edmond sums up the overall situation: ‘There is a great deal of original work, scripted in one way or another. Some is very good, some not.... But there is so much lively grist to the mill that it is hard to say what one might call “experimental” anymore. There’s a lot of overlap with dance.... Immersive theatre is big now. That’s global. Diversity of course – that’s global too. Lots of strong Pasifika work on a number of levels. LBGQTQ+ is presently centre stage.’<sup>81</sup>

The youthful character of its audience was a lesson impressed on Silo Theatre in 2006 when ‘to try and keep the company afloat, they programmed Roger Hall’s *Glide Time*. It was meant to be a kind of safety net, woven from the pockets of a more conservative, older generation.’ This was a carefully prepared 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary production with leading local actors. ‘Devastatingly – though perhaps tellingly – *Glide Time* lost money, one of the only Roger Hall productions to have done so in the history of New Zealand theatre, while *Take Me Out* [a high-risk American play about baseball] ended up turning a profit.’<sup>82</sup> Ian Hughes explains the complex nature of today’s theatre politics in this way: ‘As someone who wants to be creative in New Zealand you sometimes have to dance around a little to fit in to the agendas (cultural, political and financial) that swirl through the industry – the need to acknowledge Māori culture, the need to have a new Zealand voice (whatever that is), the need to make international product, the need to sell tickets to a predominantly upper-middle-class white audience, the need to be edgy enough to get pats on the back from your fellow practitioners....’<sup>83</sup>

### **Local versus global**

Continuing to exist somewhere in the midst of the extremes (such as the young versus the old, or the hip versus the conservative) are a small number of thoughtful New Zealand plays which are a kind of contemporary re-working of critical localism – plays following in the tradition of Mason, McGee, Thompson, Renée, Parker or Hoar, among others. Today, it is easier for such plays to find a place if they can attach themselves to an issue of ethnic or gender politics and include material startling enough to trigger public debate.

Localism is, however, hardly ever talked about, and those who bring up the subject risk being accused of living ‘in a sentimentalist bubble of nationalistic kitsch,’ as John Smythe found himself characterised after he pointed out that a majority of the ‘New Zealand plays’ that had recently won awards (in 2011) had non-New Zealand settings or characters. Smythe was reflecting on a current trend, the fact that it now seemed *de rigueur* for a play to have a global aspect. When he also asked: ‘Have we entered a new era of cultural cringe or is there a better term for this phenomenon?’ he was accused by Simon Taylor (a writer and director interested in ‘transdisciplinary theatre’ and digital technology) of being hopelessly old-fashioned. He was also accused of sounding like a Nazi in his lack of respect for ‘diversity,’ and of providing an ‘outrageous’ example of ‘New Zealand mediocrity’ because he still used the phrase ‘telling our own stories in our own voices.’<sup>84</sup> This was a type of collision likely to occur today in any of the arts, as a generation that has struggled over the years to create space for local work now finds itself confronted by impatient, younger artists who pursue other, global priorities.

Also taking part in the above debate was Hughes who linked it to the decline in the unity of the theatre audience: ‘I do remember working behind the bar of the Watershed and seeing the range of peoples going into the theatre that I don't really see any more – or at least it is fractured – [the] ATC crowd versus The Basement crowd.... Who those people are has grown and expanded and changed.’ Another participant, Martyn Wood, offered his own way of thinking about localism: ‘A work by a New Zealand writer, whether it is set in New York or Newtown will always have a Kiwi flavour – it is the unique way we filter a subject through our own sensibility that makes a New Zealand play.’<sup>85</sup> Yet while it may still be possible to tell global stories in a distinctive way, the concept of localism clearly requires some re-definition because a culture with a high-speed connection to the internet is no longer local in the old sense. Particularly common today are plays in which the local and the global collide, involving immigrants or New Zealanders moving overseas.

One way to grasp the change has been the concept of ‘glocalization,’ defined by Joachim Blatter as ‘the simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing.’ In other words: ‘Local spaces are shaped and local identities are created by globalized contacts as well as by local circumstances. Thus, globalization entails neither the end of geography nor declining heterogeneity.’<sup>86</sup> Much of the discussion of this term has unfortunately been kidnapped by marketing theorists, but it provides a starting-point for thinking about the complex evolution of the local. Since live theatre is an art-form with a strong social dimension, it remains an important field in which to explore such issues.

### **The power of live performance**

The struggle to sustain a career and to keep a company afloat is as difficult as it has always been, but in one respect local theatre has continued to grow more strongly than the other arts. Creative NZ's 2015 Review noted that paid attendances for the year reported by companies that had received its funding added up to an impressive 356,357. Murray Lynch, the Director of Playmarket, estimated that in 2013 about 60% of the material on professional stages was of local origin.<sup>87</sup> In 2018 Playmarket announced even more growth: 79 percent ‘of the 221 works performed’ in the country during the previous year had been local. Nine companies presented ‘100 per cent local material’ and

‘no professional theatre staged less than 50 per cent New Zealand work.’ Also, ‘the number is likely to be far more if fringe, community and comedy events and venues [are] included in the research.’<sup>88</sup> Also striking were Playmarket’s statistics which showed that of the 221 ‘works’ performed, 32 (more than 14%) were Maori and 24 (almost 11%) Pasifika. There were 16 Asian projects (7% of the total). 52% of the plays were by women playwrights, and 48% by New Zealand women. All this was evidence of remarkable change and growth in local theatre.

At the same time, all these figures need to be qualified by a recognition that most of these plays had only short seasons, and there were few cases of a new play being picked up by theatres in other cities. The size of casts and the wages for participants tended to be modest, so this huge display of energy was not evidence of secure, long-term careers. Playwrights who started out in the ‘70s or ‘80s still tend to regard that earlier period as a more positive environment than today’s over-crowded marketplace. Nevertheless, a great range of talent is on display and local theatre has become confident and established, in cultural if not in financial terms. Edmond argued in 2013 that ‘the past thirty years of playwriting practice in Aotearoa New Zealand represent the strongest literary contribution of that period. It has been a flowering of many and varied writers...’<sup>89</sup> His essay listed thirty important playwrights.<sup>90</sup> In 2018 he added: ‘Theatre in Auckland over the past decade has probably had its best 10 years ever.’

In terms of the presentation of local work, the only creative area that seems equally buoyant today is the visual arts, an area that has two special advantages – the fact that most artists create objects that can be re-sold, and the fact that they are largely safe from overseas competition. Today, most local theatres present New Zealand plays, which is an advantage they have gained not only from increased familiarity, but also because it is expensive to import an overseas company or to purchase the rights to West End or Broadway hits (though those shows do occasionally reach us through a local production). Another reason is, as we have discussed, the fitness of theatre to serve as a vehicle for today’s strong interest in identity politics. Yet another advantage of live theatre is the physical, immediate nature of what it offers. As Justin Lewis puts it: ‘As people consume more and more digital media, their gaze is getting smaller and smaller. Live experiences open you up ... and give [you] something different.’<sup>91</sup> Music performance is thriving today for the same reason, as actor and song-writer Brett McKenzie (of *Flight of the Conchords*) observes: ‘Life has become so screen heavy, whether it’s phones or TV, it feels really important now to play live. To get people in a room to experience something,...you get this feeling of being together, it’s great.’<sup>92</sup>

Playwrights working in more orthodox styles would argue that the experience of live theatre has always created a sense of immediacy for its audience. Yet drama today is certainly seeking to make the most of this strength by becoming more ‘immersive,’ moving away from the limitations of the ‘black box’ or ‘proscenium arch’ tradition of theatre. Productions provide opportunities for the audience to interact, besides emphasising ‘in your face’ visual aspects (nudity is no longer shocking), and adding music and dance elements. In a similar fashion, revved-up ‘slam poetry,’ ‘improv’ (improvisational theatre) and stand-up comedy are popular with young audiences. It is ironic that when immersive theatre echoes some of the avant-garde methods of the 1960s and ‘70s (themselves derived in part from modernism or the older commedia dell’arte tradition), today’s theatre-goers think of those methods as excitingly new.

The future is not certain as technology may find new ways to compete, such as 'virtual reality' which is undergoing rapid development. But for now theatre has been making the most of its difference, as live music has also, along with heightened forms of performance in poetry and the visual arts.

### **Conclusion**

Theatre shared in the '60s/'70s upsurge, and its close links with other areas – such as literature, film, radio and television – are typical of the New Zealand tendency to work across boundaries. As is the case with all the arts, survival remains the key issue, especially today when the range of competing options continues to multiply. Theatre is not a cheap art form, but it does enjoy some current advantages, such as the interest in identity politics, the fashion for stand-up comedy, and the immediacy of live performance.

In these precarious times I hesitate to take issue with an art form that is succeeding in attracting youthful audiences; but to voice one personal concern, there are times when the current range of plays strikes me as narrow. I tire of the over-heated, in-your-face style of theatre, as I also tire of some currently fashionable forms of poetry, film and television. When an area of culture becomes crowded, there is a tendency to try to shout the loudest. There seems no longer much use for adjectives like 'subtle' and 'understated.' Also, an over-emphasis on issues of identity restricts political vision. This is not to advocate a return to traditional forms of theatre (though we would certainly benefit from the chance to see more of its history). Rather, it is a plea for a wider range of approach and experiment, which funding bodies, festivals, universities and other groups could do more to encourage.

### **Postscript**

The chapter above was written shortly before the arrival of COVID-19. Since then, the pandemic has had a huge impact on all genres of live performance. Today, in 2022, social activities are gradually returning to normal, but many older citizens – a particularly important audience for traditional forms of drama – remain nervous of crowds, even when a theatre requires them to wear masks.

*The New York Times* reported in August this year that theatre audiences throughout the USA "remain well below pre-pandemic levels," and "Some fear that the virus is accelerating long-term trends that have troubled arts organizations for years, including...the decline of the subscription model for selling tickets...and the increasing tendency among consumers to purchase tickets at the last minute."<sup>93</sup>

The same trends are visible in our country. At present, it remains to be seen whether inoculation has tamed the virus, allowing live performance to continue in its present forms. If not, then theatre will need to develop new approaches.



## Theatre Conversation (19 September 2018)

### Stuart Hoar

Stuart Hoar (born in New Plymouth in 1957) is a leading New Zealand dramatist, the author of many stage plays and radio plays. At the time I interviewed him, two of his plays were being performed in Auckland – *Bright Star* (about New Zealand-born astronomer Beatrice Tinsley) at the Herald Theatre and *Rendered* (about New Zealand's involvement in the Middle East) at the ASB Waterfront Theatre. As in other interviews, I was particularly interested in asking him about his career and the business of making a living from creative activity.

Hoar started his working life as a free-lance sound recordist for a string of film and television companies. In his spare time he was writing poetry, and around 1983 he decided to get serious about a writing career. 'But how was I going to earn money? There were radio studios in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and I think they were all producing radio plays, so I simply sat down and wrote a play, more or less off the top of my head, a comedy based on my experiences as a sound recordist. The play was accepted – I probably still have the contract somewhere – and it paid about 1500 dollars, which was handsome in those days. So I kind of accidentally became a dramatist. I went along to the production and really enjoyed it. I met the actors and thought this was the greatest fun. I wrote maybe two or three more radio plays before deciding I was really in the swing of writing drama, so I should write a stage play.'

The 'giant over-long script' that became *Squatter*, his first stage play, turned out to be a huge success for Hoar. It provided a sharp and novel perspective on South Island history, focusing on class struggles in Canterbury in 1894. Playmarket was holding a bi-annual script workshop which anyone could enter, and *Squatter* was selected for the 1986 event. Auckland University lecturer Sebastian Black served as the dramaturge and Mervyn Thompson as the director of the workshop production. In Hoar's words, 'It was an amazing experience, the whole week was very intense. And something else came out of it because Raymond Hawthorne was at the workshop and he programmed *Squatter* for the Mercury Theatre. That launched my career, so to speak.'

Hoar agrees that the 1970s and '80s was an exceptional time to be involved in the arts in New Zealand: 'I was lucky because I caught the end of that. It all seemed so easy – I sat down and wrote this long, messy, shapeless stage play, it was knocked into shape, then Raymond put it on in what was then the largest theatre in New Zealand. The Mercury had full design and props departments. I met Robert Johnson, the musical arranger, who became a dear friend. And later I got a playwright residency at the Mercury. There was a real confidence in that period, an excitement especially in theatre but also across the board. There was a sense of "Yes, we should invest in infrastructure," and I remember thinking, "Wow, where are things going to be in 30 years' time?"'

Running costs forced the Mercury to close in 1992, and Hoar feels that the theatre community 'lost its impetus in the '90s and never really got it back.' He acknowledges that 'There's a lot more theatre happening today, compared to 30 years ago, just in terms of the number of plays. But the thing to remember is that those plays have been produced quite often by the writers themselves, and they run for just five nights. A two-week run is very rare, especially at theatres like BATS or Basement.'

Such theatres have mostly younger writers and audiences. He adds: 'There are other wonderful theatres such as Q, but few can afford to use them. They are so expensive because they were never funded properly. There's the Auckland Theatre Company at the ASB Waterfront but they don't do shows back-to-back, and they are now coming to grips with the reality of running a large expensive building.'

Hoar feels that a major problem has been the reluctance of the government to fund the arts adequately. 'For example, for a number of years now I have been saying we need a national theatre. When the Scottish National Theatre started in 2006, it was funded handsomely but it was basically just four people in an office. There wasn't a building, and they said "OK, we will commission, rehearse and tour plays, and some can be small." But now they have a giant building and they've got about 50 people on the payroll – they've turned into a monster. So now I am looking instead at the Welsh National theatre because that is still a very slim model.' Hoar added that the funding of arts organisations in New Zealand – the Film Commission, NZ on Air, Creative NZ and others – could easily be increased by tens of millions of dollars every year without making a noticeable dent in the country's finances. 'We could afford it without blinking, it's a tiny fraction of the weekly tax take. But what we have here is still an old-fashioned resistance to the fact that you should fund the arts across the board and do it without thinking. Europe has done it as a matter of course. What interests me is that here it's actually not a budget thing, there's a kind of cultural resistance.'

Even during his most successful years, Hoar has never made a full living from his writing but 'more like half a living.' He has worked as a cleaner, and done some writing for television – 'It paid well but I didn't like it much.' He wrote between 30 and 40 radio plays which got produced. 'I love radio drama, but it doesn't exist here now.' After Hoar became well-known as a writer, he was able to obtain some grants from Creative NZ. 'On average, I got one every 3 or 4 years, and they have been amazingly helpful.'

Occasional residencies and fellowships have also been important, and the Burns Fellowship at Otago University in 1993 'set off a different trajectory' for him: 'Roger Hall was there teaching as a playwright, and when he left to move up to Auckland, his job became part time and I applied for it and got it. That was my first university teaching job. Since then it's been hit and miss, but I have had on-and-off part-time work at universities, and that has absolutely supported me as a writer. Then Playmarket hired me part-time and in 2013 their job became full-time. That was interesting, because it was the first full-time position I had ever had in my life – and I was then about 56!' When he looks back at his life, he feels 'it was accidental in a way.' He says: 'I went down to Dunedin thanks to the Burns Fellowship, and stayed down there because I met my partner, then Roger accidentally left so there was a job for me. Those university jobs over the years have been like gold to me because, as I tell my students "I don't actually have a degree." I have been able to work for pretty well every university because of my specialized knowledge.'

As for mid-career problems, 'Being a "hot young thing" at the time of *Squatter* lasted about 5 minutes. It was kind of enjoyable, but it wasn't real. You are naïve at that age, you write plays and you think, "Oh well, theatres will put them on," and of course they don't, because you've had your turn!' He adds: 'I know a number of playwrights who are not that old, but are getting too old for the Basement or BATS scene. Mid-career kicks in, and what can they do? There are three larger

producing theatres – ATC, Court and Circa – who have a slightly different model. And they do put on a lot of New Zealand work, but that is only a fraction of the amount of work that is being written by local playwrights. I *know* that is the case because I work for Playmarket.'

He has also done other kinds of writing. A novel, *The Hard Light* was published by Penguin NZ in 1998. He had received a Creative NZ grant when he started writing it, and publisher Geoff Walker was keeping an alert eye on the grants and contacted him to ask about the project. Hoar was impressed by Walker and by his interest, and very pleased when Penguin later published the book. It was another rare case of things running smoothly, a 'dream run' like *Squatter*. He did not write any more novels over the subsequent two decades, but 'I'm just working on the last chapter of what will be my second novel, if I manage to get it out.'

He has also written the libretti for four operas, three by Anthony Ritchie and one by Christopher Blake. All of them have been produced, and one for children has gone on tour, but operas are a difficult genre because companies are nervous about the cost. *Quartet*, one of Hoar's operas with Ritchie, had only four singers because it was 'based around the trials and tribulations of a touring string quartet.' It gained a performance at the 2004 Wellington Festival of the Arts, but it was considered too expensive to tour because 'the singers priced themselves off the market.' Theatre companies similarly have to worry about budgets, and young playwrights are often unaware how important it is to keep the size of casts to a minimum. Hoar recalls his own learning process: 'Many years ago, Murray Lynch used to run a company in Auckland called Tantrum and he said "Write a play," so I did, a literary comedy. They had 10 actors in the company, but by the time I had finished the play, Tantrum had more or less disappeared. Then Grant Tilly, one of the main actors at Circa, loved the play and said "If you can get this down to six actors, we can do it." Finally – it took me years – I managed it, but by then Grant was gone and nobody else was interested.'

Asked for his thoughts on the digital era, Hoar comments: 'Online I can watch any damn thing I want. I can do video calls with my phone. And that is like *Star Trek*, but the kids today think nothing of it – it's just a given for them. People ask what my new play, *Rendered*, is about, and it's about a number of things, but for me it's about the fact that warfare now operates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are still only two or three countries that have military drones, but in a few years everyone will have them, controlled robots. We just live our lives and think nothing of it because it doesn't affect us, but it's a double situation – we live in the past and we live in the future – and there is always a tipping point when we will move fully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And what that means hasn't yet sunk in.'

Discussing the perspectives of young people on politics, he comments that 'There's a kind of blindness to class as a way of interpreting the world. And what's interesting is that our generation can't convey that to them. My students hadn't heard of Mao Zedong, he belonged to last century, and events like the Cultural Revolution mean nothing to them. Collectively they are adorable, this generation, and articulate – well, I'm generalizing – but what is their world view? When we were younger we were trying to figure out the sense of politics, of class, but those concerns seem to have gone. Even the politicians are younger than us now!'

He sees theatre as lacking infrastructure in terms of the small number of repertory theatres that are long-term resident companies; but live drama can survive in the digital age 'because it is live.' New technology is used in staging, and theatre fashions come and go, but 'All theatre is immersive,

because even in a conventional, run-of-the-mill production, you are sitting there, people do stuff in front of you for a while, and then everyone goes home. Essentially it's always real people and in live time – as it has been done for thousands of years!

Asked about the fact that many of his plays – including *Rendered* and *Bright Star* – strongly combine New Zealand with international elements, Hoar speaks of the fact that the country is no longer as 'isolated' as it once was: 'Our local stories don't have to be that local because we don't live that local nowadays. Our stories cannot exclude the world, because now that's almost impossible. And our community is not a homogenous thing. We make it homogenous when we speak of "us NZers," but that is an artificial idea. Still, there is a flavor to life here which nobody else can tell, because you have to live here to know what it is. After a few years, Chinese or English people living here start to get it too, the sense of what that flavour is. And to my way of thinking, that is the essence of telling our stories. As for cultural cringe, it may seem to have gone away but it keeps coming up – really, it's still all over the place. Things aren't perfect here, but this is who we are, and we need to explore that.'

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<sup>1</sup> 'Theatre' is defined here as live performance before a live audience in a particular place. Dance and music also fit the definition, but this chapter will focus on plays (staged story-telling).

<sup>2</sup> 'Theatre and Drama,' *Oxford New Zealand Encyclopedia*, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.338.

<sup>3</sup> 'Laurence Olivier's company in New Zealand, 1948,' *Te Ara* (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/42187/laurence-oliviers-company-in-new-zealand-1948>)

<sup>4</sup> 'Theatre: Dramatic Societies,' *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand 1966* (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/theatre/page-2>)

<sup>5</sup> John Smythe, *Downstage Upfront*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2004, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.159.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Downstage Upfront*, p.201.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford New Zealand Encyclopedia*, op. cit., p.340.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Downstage Upfront*, pp.242-43.

<sup>10</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.243,

<sup>11</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.34.

<sup>12</sup> Murray Edmond, *Then It Was Now Again: Selected Critical Writing*, Pokeno, Atuanui Press, 2014, p.92.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Simpson, 'Lindsay, Alex Sylvester,' *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5l10/lindsay-alex-sylvester>)

<sup>14</sup> John Smythe, *Theatreview*, 4 July 2013 (<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/forum/topic.php?id=1108>)

<sup>15</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.18.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Hall, *Bums on Seats: The Backstage Story*, Auckland, Viking, 1998, p.73.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.52.

<sup>18</sup> *Then It Was Now Again*, p.88.

<sup>19</sup> *Then It Was Now Again*, p.137.

<sup>20</sup> *Bums on Seats*, p.129.

<sup>21</sup> Ross Jolly, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, a documentary about Roger Hall directed by Shirley Horrocks, screened TV One, July 2006.

<sup>22</sup> John Clarke, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.200.

<sup>24</sup> Grant Tilly, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Hall, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Hall, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, 2006.

- <sup>27</sup> Ross Jolly, interview for *Who Laughs Last*, 2006.
- <sup>28</sup> Reported by Murray Edmond in 'Not Much to Do Besides Watch Each Other's Lives Unfold: Playwriting 1975-2000 in Aotearoa,' *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, No.34:2, 2016, p.151.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Act 9: Theatre's Greatest Hits,' *Encore: The Story of New Zealand Theatre*, Radio NZ, 17 August 2014 (<https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/thedramahour/audio/20149417/encore-act-nine-theatre-s-greatest-hits>)
- <sup>30</sup> 'Act 9: Theatre's Greatest Hits,' op. cit.
- <sup>31</sup> Greg McGee, *Tall Tales (Some True)*, Auckland, Penguin, 2008, p.10.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.163.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp.211-212.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p.212.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp.215-216.
- <sup>36</sup> *All My Lives*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls, 1980, p.99.
- <sup>37</sup> *All My Lives*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls, 1980, p.111.
- <sup>38</sup> In 1984, Thompson (who had been a supporter of women dramatists such as Renée) was kidnapped by a group of women who believed he had committed rape. Afterwards, some feminists sided with the vigilante group, yet other feminists regarded the charge as unproven and the violence of the kidnapping as inappropriate. For an introduction to the case, see this 2016 coverage in *The Spinoff*:  
<https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/12-09-2016/the-mervyn-thompson-affair-revisiting-the-strange-case-of-a-teacher-chained-by-vigilantes-to-a-tree-in-western-springs/>  
<https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/13-09-2016/the-mervyn-thompson-affair-the-women-who-made-the-attack-must-have-believed-they-were-doing-a-brave-thing/>  
 It is important to add that there are other perspectives on these events, and the *Spinoff* coverage merely provides a starting-point.
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Beatson & Dianne Beatson. *The Arts in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Palmerston North, Massey University Sociology Department, 1994, p.143.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Eric on the Role of Theatre and the Work of a Director' [interview with Eric Hooper by Dorothy Hunt], *NZine*, 21 September 2001 ([http://www.nzine.co.nz/features/elric\\_part3.html](http://www.nzine.co.nz/features/elric_part3.html))
- <sup>41</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.310.
- <sup>42</sup> Rosabel Tan, 'A Brief History of Silo Theatre,' *Pantograph Punch*, 13 June 2014 (<http://pantograph-punch.com/video/a-brief-history-of-silo-theatre>).
- <sup>43</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.344.
- <sup>44</sup> Baz Macdonald, 'The Last Regional Theatre: Inside Centrepoint's Fight to Stay,' *The Pantograph Punch*, 25 May 2018 (<https://pantograph-punch.com/post/the-last-regional-theatre-centrepoint>).
- <sup>45</sup> See, for example, Sally Blundell, 'The Shows Must Go On.' *Listener*, 14 May 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.176.
- <sup>47</sup> The theatres included the Herald Theatre (1990), the Silo (1997), Q Theatre (2007), and the ASB Waterfront (2016).
- <sup>48</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.33.
- <sup>49</sup> Kate Prior, 'The Play in the Playground: The New Zealand Play and Playwriting in Schools,' *The Pantograph Punch*, 20 April 2017 (<https://pantograph-punch.com/post/the-play-in-the-playground>).
- <sup>50</sup> *Bums on Seats*, op. cit, p.209.
- <sup>51</sup> *Bums on Seats*, op. cit, p.213.
- <sup>52</sup> *Then It Was Now Again*, op. cit., p.81.
- <sup>53</sup> *Review of Theatre: Final Report*, op. cit., p.29.
- <sup>54</sup> Dionne Christian, 'New Zealand Theatre Takes its Place in Spotlight,' *Herald*, 1 September 2018, p.A10.
- <sup>55</sup> Email to author, 2 September 2018.
- <sup>56</sup> *Downstage Upfront*, p.266.
- <sup>57</sup> 'Women's Theatre,' *Te Ara* (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/27923/womens-theatre>).
- <sup>58</sup> 'Renée Taylor (writer)', *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renee\\_Taylor\\_\(writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renee_Taylor_(writer)))
- <sup>59</sup> Dani McDonald, 'Women take out the top ranks in this year's Wellington theatre awards,' *Stuff*, 30 November 2017 (<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/stage-and-theatre/99394394/Women-take-out-the-top-ranks-in-this-years-Wellington-theatre-awards>)
- <sup>60</sup> *Then It Was Now Again*, op. cit., p.195.
- <sup>61</sup> 'The Maori Merchant of Venice,' *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Maori\\_Merchant\\_of\\_Venice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Maori_Merchant_of_Venice))
- <sup>62</sup> 'Maori Theatre,' *Te Ara* (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/maori-theatre-te-whare-tapere-hou/page-3>)

- <sup>63</sup> David O'Donnell, "'Spiritual Play": Ritual Performance and Spirituality in Samoan Theatre,' a University of Otago on-line paper (<https://www.otago.ac.nz/performance-of-the-real/otago666945.pdf>). Also see his book, *Floating Islanders: Pasifika Theatre in Aotearoa*, Dunedin, Otago University Press, 2017.
- <sup>64</sup> 'Areas for Improvement,' *Review of Theatre: Final Report*, Wellington, Creative NZ, November 2015, p.25.
- <sup>65</sup> For a political critique of identity politics, published in England, see Asad Haider's *Mistaken Identity: Race and Gender in the Age of Trump*, London, Verso, 2018.
- <sup>66</sup> Email to author, 2 September 2018.
- <sup>67</sup> 'Eric on the Role of Theatre and the Work of a Director,' op. cit.
- <sup>68</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.371.
- <sup>69</sup> 'Eric on the Role of Theatre and the Work of a Director,' op. cit.
- <sup>70</sup> Nathan Joe, reviewing 'Hir' (Silo Theatre) for *Theatrescenes* 7 August 2018 <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-hir-silo-theatre>
- <sup>71</sup> Its website is at [www.proudlyasiantheatre.com/](http://www.proudlyasiantheatre.com/)
- <sup>72</sup> 'Chinese New Zealanders,' *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_New\\_Zealanders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_New_Zealanders))
- <sup>73</sup> Monday 18th April 2016  
*The Wireless*, <http://thewireless.co.nz/articles/exploring-identity-politics-with-theatre>
- <sup>74</sup> Dionne Christian, 'Redefining What Are our Plays,' *Herald*, 1 September 2018, 'Weekend' Section p.14.
- <sup>75</sup> 'Asian Theatre Comes of Age,' *Herald*, 10 September 2018, p.A34.
- <sup>76</sup> Quoted *Downstage Upfront*, p.184. Endnote #38 explains the context of Thompson's remark.
- <sup>77</sup> Dionne Christian, 'New Zealand Theatre Takes its Place in Spotlight,' op. cit.
- <sup>78</sup> Emails to author, 1 September and 2 September 2018.
- <sup>79</sup> An interesting debate of this kind was set off by the 'Auckland Theatre Company Choice of Opening Show.' See *Theatreview* from 8 February 2016 (<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/forum/topic.php?id=1273>)
- <sup>80</sup> Email to author, 2 September 2018.
- <sup>81</sup> Email to author, 1 September 2018.
- <sup>82</sup> Rosabel Tan, 'A Brief History of Silo Theatre,' op. cit.
- <sup>83</sup> *Theatreview*, op. cit. (<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/forum/topic.php?id=1273>)
- <sup>84</sup> 'What Makes a New Zealand Play?' *Theatreviews*, from 26 May 2010 shows(<https://www.theatreview.org.nz/forum/topic.php?id=887>)
- <sup>85</sup> 'What Makes a New Zealand Play?' *Theatreviews*, op. cit. Wood added: 'No British writer would have explored Jack the Ripper in quite the way Albert Belz did in *Yours Truly*, no American would come close to the way the Hackman boys chose to put *Apollo 13* onstage – a show more infused with the can-do, Kiwi Number 8 Wire mentality than most (something I can attest after countless hours soldering, labelling and wiring as part of an endless stream of volunteers to create the consoles that give the show its unique edge).'
- <sup>86</sup> Joachim Blatter, 'Glocalization,' *Encyclopædia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/glocalization>
- <sup>87</sup> Quoted in 'The Shows Must Go On,' op. cit.
- <sup>88</sup> Dionne Christian, 'New Zealand Theatre Takes its Place in Spotlight,' *Herald*, 1 September 2018, p.A10.
- <sup>89</sup> *Then It Was Now Again*, p.85.
- <sup>90</sup> Dave Armstrong, Albert Belz, Jean Betts, Linda Chanwai-Earle, Sarah Delahunty, Ken Duncum, Fiona Farrell, Angie Farrow, Michelanne Forster, Toa Fraser, Dianna Fuemana, David Geary, Miria George, Briar Grace-Smith, Pip Hall, Roger Hall, Gary Henderson, Stuart Hoar, Eli Kent, Oscar Kightley, Hone Kouka, Justin Lewis, Anthony McCarten, Greg McGee, Arthur Meek, Carl Nixon, Simon O'Connor, Dean Parker, Lorae Parry, Vivienne Plumb, Jacob Rajan, Jo Randerson, Renée, Victor Rodger, Paul Rothwell, Thomas Sainsbury, Fiona Samuel, Stephen Sinclair, Mitch Tawhi Thomas, and Kirk Torrance.
- <sup>91</sup> Rebecca Fox, 'Colouring our Social Fabric,' *Otago Daily Times*, 15 June 2017 (<https://www.odt.co.nz/entertainment/theatre/colouring-our-social-fabric>)
- <sup>92</sup> 'Musical Chairs,' *Herald*, 6 September 2018, *TimeOut* section, p.3.
- <sup>93</sup> Michael Paulson and Javier C. Hernández, 'Live Performance Is Back. But Audiences Have Been Slow to Return,' *New York Times*, 21 August 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/21/arts/performing-arts-pandemic-attendance.html>)