

Searching high & low

An authoritative, detailed and sometimes-critical survey of the New Zealand arts scene.



by NICHOLAS REID

CULTURE IN A SMALL COUNTRY: THE ARTS IN NEW ZEALAND, by Roger Horrocks (Atuanui Press, \$45)

Some things are made very clear in Roger Horrocks' survey of the arts. Even now, it's not easy for local artists of any genre to make a living by their art. In spite of some international hits, this country's art and literature remain largely unknown overseas. And, depressingly, there is still a strong strain of anti-intellectualism here, not helped by the pragmatic, money-focused neoliberalism that has been with us for the past 40 years.

Culture in a Small Country concentrates on the past eight decades of New Zealand arts. In sequence, it deals with the different forms: literature and publishing, visual arts, film, classical music and popular music, concluding with chapters on "the digital world" and the effects of the pandemic. Horrocks acknowledges that there is nothing on theatre, dance, jazz or craft and object art, but his 400 pages of text are as definitive an overview as one author could

possibly produce.

Sandwiched between some chapters are interviews with creative people – the most heartfelt comes from film-maker Dame Gaylene Preston and the most substantial from musician Don McGlashan.

Horrocks has many legitimate worries about the arts now. In literature,

Above, musician Don McGlashan. Below, film-maker Dame Gaylene Preston.

international imprints have taken over New Zealand's book market like a reversion to the 1950s. Despite the huge proliferation of creative-writing courses, there are now fewer opportunities for debut writers to get published, he believes. Genre novels by Kiwi authors do reasonably well overseas, he says, so long as they are not set in New Zealand. Meanwhile, only 4% of books sold in this country are literary novels aimed at an adult readership.

In the visual arts, there have been big advances in representation by women and greater visibility of Māori and Pasifika art. But there is still a general resistance to conceptual art and an odd tension between "the local, the national and the global" when it comes to visual styles.

Although our films have often benefited from subsidies, few break even, except on rare occasions when they attract international attention. Thanks to the international-focused Wētā



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Workshop, says Horrocks, New Zealand film-making now divides into "an overseas-oriented field of large projects ... and a locally oriented field of small projects". Classical music gets slandered as "elitist" and RNZ Concert has had to fight for its future. Popular music is innovative and creative (Horrocks lingers over Flying Nun and the Otago sound), but international streaming and the internet mean it is often bypassed by its intended audience. There are many new forms of creativity, thanks to the digital age, but "young people are quick to assume that what is online represents the sum total of knowledge".

A little pushback is required, however. There has been an explosion of crime fiction set in this country in recent years, and historical fiction is doing well, too. Much book publishing here is run by overseas companies, it's true, although the latest New Zealand publishing report notes that local books generated more than \$53.2 million last year. For what it's worth, most of the longlist at last year's book awards were from university presses or independents – and all of the winners. Meanwhile, new publishers are flourishing, even if they are tiny, nimble

and bare bones, based around very small print runs. Te reo Māori publishing recorded an increase of 40% in unit sales, on the back of a 24% rise in 2020. Screen-production revenue even five years ago was \$3.5 billion, pushed by international

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productions, although it's worth noting recent local release *Whina* has taken more than \$1m at the box office. And although Six60 are probably the only local act capable of filling Eden Park, dozens of Kiwi bands are doing well overseas now.

Horrocks is an insider who has served as deputy chair of NZ On Air. He knows in detail about arts policy and funding and can be scathing about how these things have sometimes been handled. When it

comes to the pandemic, he praises the government for the way it dealt with the infection itself, but chastises Creative New Zealand and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage for their poor response to the arts at that time.

Does all this add up to a dyspeptic series of complaints? Not at all. Horrocks celebrates in detail what has been achieved and what has the potential to be achieved. The names of genuinely creative New Zealanders jostle on the pages. He uses relatable language and takes "low" culture as seriously as he takes "high" culture. He doesn't necessarily propose solutions to what ails the arts, other than to say our arts culture "will need to be rebuilt almost from the ground up because of the digital revolution and because of the pandemic". But if you are at all interested in New Zealand culture, this is a must-read. ■

Roger Horrocks will be speaking at a free event at the Auckland Writers Festival on Tuesday, August 23.

