New Zealand Drama

The initial material in this resource has been adapted from this TKI site:

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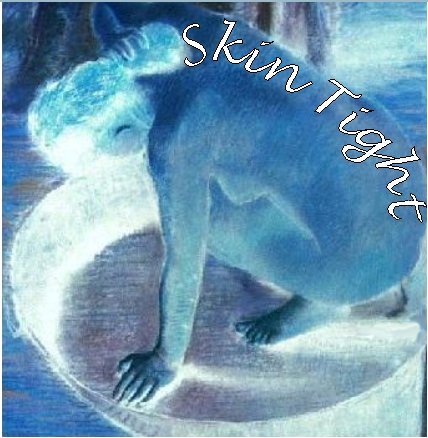
Adapted and extended by Chris Burton for PNBHS Drama.

Updated August 2013.



What is New Zealand theatre?

[](http://images.google.co.nz/imgres?imgurl=http://www.theatrenewzealand.co.nz/images/background.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.theatrenewzealand.co.nz/links.php&h=1152&w=738&sz=15&hl=en&start=55&tbnid=FwB3I6nQrl9mrM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=96&prev=/images?q=new+zealand+drama+plays&start=42&gbv=2&ndsp=21&hl=en&sa=N)





New Zealand theatre is a broad category comprising productions of plays by New Zealand playwrights or with a New Zealand context. While some plays written by New Zealanders look beyond our shores for their setting and situation, many more have in common a time and place that is clearly recognisable as New Zealand.

All theatre is situated in a time and place and is a reflection of and a response to societal, philosophical, and theatrical ideas that have preceded it. New Zealand theatre comes in a myriad of theatrical forms reflecting the history of western drama and, more recently, Māori, Pasifika, and Asian theatrical traditions and performance styles. New Zealand theatre explores what it means to belong to the community of New Zealand. Until recently, New Zealand theatre has echoed the theatrical patterns of western theatre but we now have a very clear dramatic genre of our own which mirrors the social, political and ideological paths our nation has followed in its brief history.

Key periods in the development of New Zealand theatre

The chart beneath suggests key periods in the development of a New Zealand theatrical voice, indicating historical events against which these periods were set, and noting some contemporary international playwrights.

| Key NZ Drama forms/styles and significant NZ playwrights | World and New Zealand events | Contemporary international playwrights | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1890s  Melodrama, vaudeville  Building of theatres and opera houses | The Māori land wars  The Boer War  The New Zealand long depression  The First World War | Henrik Ibsen 1828–1906  George Bernard Shaw 1856–1950  Anton Chekhov 1860–1904 | |
| 1920s–1950s  British Drama League plays | The Great Depression | Bertolt Brecht 1898–1956  Eugene O’Neill 1888–1953  Frederico Lorca 1899–1936  Noel Coward 1899–1973 | |
| 1940  Agitation propaganda (agitprop) theatre | The Second World War | Samuel Beckett 1906–1989  Tennessee Williams 1912–1983  Arthur Miller 1915–2005 | |
| 1950s  The beginning of a New Zealand identity in professional theatre:  Bruce Mason | The Korean War | Harold Pinter 1930–  Edward Albee 1928– | |
| 1970s  Development of theatre funding, advocacy, and training:  The Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council  Playmarket  The New Zealand Drama School  Professional theatres | The feminist movement  Māori land marches | Caryl Churchill 1938–  Tom Stoppard 1937–  Edward Bond 1935– | |
| 1980s  Acceptance of a New Zealand identity in staged theatre:  Greg McGee  Roger Hall  Mervyn Thompson  Renée | The Springbok tour, 1981  Rogernomics; right-wing economic theory | John Godber 1956– | |
| 1990s  A renaissance in New Zealand theatre; plays with a Māori or bicultural perspective:  Briar Grace-Smith  Hone Kouka | Iwi and Crown Treaty of Waitangi settlements |  | |
| 2000s  Development of Paskifika and Asian theatre; growth of multiple theatrical styles:  Indian Ink Theatre Company  Albert Wendt  Jo Randerson  Oscar Kightley and Dave Armstrong | |  |  |

**Some common features of NZ Theatre:**

Language style (Niu Sila/Foreskin’s Lament/Shuriken/Once on Chunk Bair)

Developing a national identity – i.e. separate from that of our emigrating countries (NS/FL/S/CB)

Cultural identity (NS/FL/S/CB)

Changing social perspectives (NS/FL/CB)

Deals with our history – political and/or non-political (NS/FL/S/CB)

Deals with areas/places in NZ (NS)

Play content reflects aspects of NZ society at some point in time (NS/FL/S/CB)

Style of performance reflects theatre trends in western world

Maori Culture explored in plays from different perspectives (NS/S)

Cross-Cultural issues explored in content (NS/S/CB)

Realism and its manipulation (NS/FL/S/CB)

1976–1990 The acceptance of the New Zealand voice

In the 1960s and 1970s, an infrastructure of theatres and support agencies was established to support drama in New Zealand: Playmarket (1973), the New Zealand Drama School (1970), the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council (1964), and the journal Act (1973). The New Zealand Theatre Federation was formed from an amalgamation of the British Drama League and the New Zealand Drama Council (1970), and nine regional professional theatres were operating.

Theatres still staged mainly international plays until 1976 and the commercial success of Glide Time, Roger Hall’s comic portrayal of middle-class New Zealand life. In 1980, Greg McGee’s Foreskin’s Lament shattered the national myth of the sports hero. These plays showed the New Zealand theatre community that to succeed plays did not need the seal of prior British approval and that home-grown drama allowed New Zealanders to find and value their own identities.

The 1970s were a time of social protest and challenges to many traditional ideas in New Zealand society. Protestors reacted against New Zealand soldiers serving in the Vietnam war and against the government’s decision to allow the 1981 tour by an all-white Springbok team. The radical feminist movement, which led to the first national conference for women (1976) and the influential paper Broadsheet, increased the drive towards equal pay for equal employment. Māori protests against land loss and a Māori thrust towards separatism gathered momentum – the first hikoi took place in 1975.

Foreskin’s Lament by Greg McGee is set against the background of a small-town rugby club. The university-educated Foreskin challenges the chauvinist attitudes of his coach and his team members. His lament at the end of the play, which has become a classic speech in New Zealand theatre, calls for more acceptance of individuals by society. (Stuart Hoar makes reference to it in his play Squatter.)

Michael Neill comments in his introduction to the play that “Only a people which has lost faith in its past fears for its future”, concluding that Foreskin’s great final lament points to a dilemma which faces all provincial societies: how to escape provinciality without submitting to debilitating definition by ‘the other’, ‘someone else’s [resonance]’. It is not enough just to see more than all those blind ‘fronts’: to see yourself, you must learn to see for yourself, not simply to reconstruct the world as others have made it.

Several other New Zealand plays have challenged our attitudes to male identity. Vincent O’Sullivan’s Shuriken (1985) is set in a New Zealand prisoner-of-war camp for Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. Shuriken tells the true story of the massacre of the prisoners, throws doubt on the nobility of war, and explores a lack of intercultural understanding and acceptance in New Zealand society. David Geary’s Lovelock’s Dream Run (1992), which is set in a contemporary boys’ boarding school, explores the possibility that running hero Jack Lovelock might have been homosexual. This play challenges society’s attitudes to sexual identity. Chunuk Bair (1982) by Maurice Shadbolt and A Soldier’s Song by Campbell Smith, both based on original documents released fifty years after the Second World War, explore the roles of men in wartime.

Roger Hall (1939–) is New Zealand’s most successful commercial playwright. In 1976, he took the local theatre world by storm with Glide Time, a play that captured the pettiness of the working day in Wellington’s government offices. The play reflected the reality of working and social life for many New Zealanders with accuracy and humour and was widely applauded. Hall’s ability to capture the New Zealand voice and our mannerisms and lifestyles through comedy has, for the past thirty years, given us an abundance of plays through which we can see ourselves reflected onstage. His plays continue to fill local theatres as well as being produced around the world and adapted for both television and film.

Theatre in the 1980s

**Theatre in the 1980s: a sense of post-colonial angst**

Challenges to social attitudes and the desire for New Zealand stories led to a rapid expansion in locally written and performed plays in the 1980s, some of which examined New Zealand’s history from a post-colonial point of view.

Post-colonial theatre attempts to describe a situation and culture by focusing on the effects of colonisation. It aims to give a voice to an oppressed group and frequently combines emotional outrage with a defiant optimism. Post-colonial theatre may incorporate performance forms from the culture that is being given a theatrical voice. It tends to incorporate performance styles other than those of traditional naturalism.

Mervyn Thompson’s Children of the Poor (1989) and Renée’s Wednesday to Come (1985) are about social classes that have been forgotten or ignored in the official histories. In exposing hidden histories, these plays show the gap between what should be and what is not and reveal how loss of hope blights human dignity. As Renée says, “I think it’s awful that you can’t have the dream that you want … we should rage about it.” (Renée, page 248)

Thompson (1936–1992) came from a coal-mining family on the West Coast of the South Island and was familiar with the working-class poverty of which he writes. He was a prominent figure in New Zealand theatre. He lectured, co-founded Christchurch’s professional theatre, and worked extensively as a writer and director. As a theatre practitioner, his plays courted controversy because they were often at the forefront of the presentational and thematic fashions of their time. Thompson was greatly influenced by Brecht and coined the term “song-play” to describe his own work, that is, a play that includes songs such as hymns and folk songs, which come from the daily lives of its characters.

Thompson insisted that “the orderly, egalitarian façade of a classless society in New Zealand is a myth spread by a middle-class, who have built their wealth and power on the assumption that this is a homogenous society”. He also observed that “a heightened sense of history in a people brings a heightened sense of power … No longer can they cling so fawningly to the apron strings of some mythical Mother called ‘England’”. (Thompson, page 21)

Children of the Poor (first produced in 1989, image 1) is set in Dunedin in the early twentieth century. Despite the promise of an egalitarian society in a land of plenty, New Zealand society too often replicated the social class divisions from which the colonials had sought to free themselves.

Thompson’s adaptation of the novel based on the life of John A. Lee (who went from being a street urchin to a politician) traces the early life of poverty-stricken Albany Porcello and records the blows that life inflicts upon him.

A chorus acts as a social conscience throughout the play, at times reflecting attitudes to the poor in society at the time, and at times building sympathy for the plight of the poor.

**CONVICT 1:** [As he moves he displays a placard which reads: “Dunedin, 1903”] In the Heart of the City was the Prison.

**CONVICT 2:** In Athol Place the prison house was Poverty.

**CONVICT 3:** The Porcello family lived in a New World Slum.

Children of the Poor, act 1

**DUNEDIN LADY 2:** Women should not parade their pregnancy, Mrs Porcello.

**DUNEDIN LADY:** Women should be above illicit behaviour, Mrs Porcello.

**DUNEDIN LADY 2:** Where did you say you came from again?

**MOTHER**, bitterly: Athol Place.

**DUNEDIN LADY 2:** Ah yes. Athol Place.

**DUNEDIN LADY:** Not a healthy part of our fair city, Mrs Porcello.

**DUNEDIN LADY 2:** Not healthy at all!

**BOTH:** No work until you are Back to Normal.

**CHORUS:** No Work!

Children of the Poor, act 1

Renée (Ngāti Kahungunu, 1929–) grew up on the East Coast. She is one of New Zealand’s most prolific writers. Her work includes plays, novels, short stories, and poetry. She frequently places women and the working class at the centre of her work.

Wednesday to Come (first produced in 1984, image 10) is the middle play of a trilogy spanning seventy years. The trilogy tells the stories of four generations of women, resilient in spite of the oppression of the working class, preserving the rituals of everyday domesticity necessary for survival.

Wednesday to Come (image 10) is set in the Great Depression. By 1933, twelve percent of the workforce was unemployed. The government’s response to the visible poverty of soup and bread queues was to lower wages and introduce work-for-dole schemes. In Wednesday to Come, Iris’s husband has committed suicide at a work camp. The play explores how the family deals with the day on which his body is returned.

In Wednesday to Come, Iris fears that history will repeat itself, in which case their era of injustice will also be ignored and little will change for working people. Granna’s dire prophetic comments bear out the same proposition.

**IRIS:** Here we sit, you ironing, Granna by the fire – could be any old Monday. But it’s not any old Monday …

**GRANNA:** Monday today. Tuesday to come.

**IRIS:** Tuesday to come …

**GRANNA:** … Hard times back there – hard times here. Nothing’s changed … nothing’s changed …

Wednesday to Come, act 1, scene 1

Some other plays that explore New Zealand stories from a post-colonial point of view are Shuriken (as above) and Squatter (1987) by Stuart Hoar.

New future: The bicultural and Māori theatre of the 1990s

In the 1990s, a bicultural perspective developed in New Zealand theatre. The ideas, values, and performance styles of both Māori culture and mainstream New Zealand (western) culture were used to express theatrical ideas and examine the behaviours and values of both.

The issues raised and values explored from a Māori perspective include: disconnection from family and/or land; race relations and the difficulty of finding a meeting point; historical injustices; and the young discovering the values of the past. The exploration of these values has involved a meeting between the performance forms of western theatre and traditional Māori ceremony and a negotiation of theatre space through marae theatre, for example, in John Broughton’s *The Return Home* (1988) or in the work of Jim Moriarty and the company Te Rakau Hua o Te Wao Tapu (see image 9 on poster 4).

The narrative (symbolic) space of plays exploring Māori perspectives is often a coastline, for example, the coastal village of Waiora in Hone Kouka’s play of the same name (1996). With a Māori perspective comes an emphasis on spiritual values, for example, the presence of tūpuna (ancestors) onstage and in the stories, and a storytelling or narrative style that uses memories of the past to understand the present, for example, Witi Ihimaera’s *Woman Far Walking* (2002). Plays from a Māori perspective may incorporate the grandeur of whaikōrero into character and dialogue and include Māori language in a range of forms.

Hone Kouka (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Raukawa), is an established playwright, writer, and producer. His play *Waiora* has toured in England. His plays have won several awards.

In his introduction to *Ta Matou Mangai: Our Own Voice: Three Plays of the 1990s*, Kouka comments:

Early Maori plays were easily pigeon-holed as the political, the worthy or the spiritual and these ‘causes’ were the main reason for the audience to attend … For a period of time we viewed ourselves as theatre’s spiritual guides … Many of our writers have thankfully rejected this mantle and the Maori voice has evolved into an unruly, unpredictable and wide-reaching animal.

*Ta Matou Mangai: Our Own Voice: Three Plays of the 1990s*, page 9

Kouka’s play, *The Prophet* (first produced in 2004, image 5), is the final play in a trilogy. It is set in the fictional Waiora, on the East Coast of the North Island. The whānau have gathered for the unveiling of Joshua’s headstone. Joshua, who took his life a year before, was one of Waiora’s rangatahi or young people.

The play revolves around the struggle of the rangatahi to come to terms with their friend’s death and to rebuild their fractured relationships.

**TY:** They put us together on purpose, eh?

**MATT:** To sort out our shit.

**TY:** Have we?

**MATT:** What do you reckon?

**TY:** No.

**MATT:** Same.

*The Prophet*, scene 13

This is the first time Ty has been back to the village since the death. He has got into trouble since then and is having difficulty being accepted.

**TY:** I couldn’t do anything. He, he said nothing to me.

**MATT:** I kinda guessed. But we knew nothing. Only you knew. It wasn’t your fault. I just, I needed someone to vent … You were the last to see him, then you took off. What did you expect.

*Pause.*

**TY:** Wanker. *(He smiles.)*

**MATT:** Had to be someone’s fault.

**TY:** Thought it was mine.

**MATT:** Same.

*The Prophet*, scene 13

*The Prophet* looks at the pressures on young people, the importance of family relationships, and the power of traditional culture. Kay (Joshua’s mother) tries to understand her lost son and reaffirm her faith in the future through getting to know the qualities in the young people.

**KAY:** … Boyboy, I remember the day *(Points to MAIA)* that girl came into this world. You rang me and said over and over “The sun is shining, sis. The sun is shining.” *(Laughs)* Eh? Kina, Andrew Beautiful has your gentleness and his mother’s grace. Rongo and David, those two *(Points to MATT and LAURA)* are good people like their parents, *(points towards TY)* as is this boy. He will always carry with him the wrong that he did. That’s the way he is. *(Beat)* They are yours …

*The Prophet*, scene 16

Briar Grace-Smith (Ngā Puhi, Ngāti Wai) is a prizewinning playwright whose plays have toured nationally and internationally.

*Purapurawhetū* (first produced in 1994, image 11) is set in the coastal town Te Kupenga, just before the opening of the refurbished marae. While Tyler, the whangai (foster-child) and an outsider to Te Kupenga, works to complete a tukutuku panel in the pattern purapurawhetū (the stars in the sky), the elderly Kui unravels a story of betrayal that is resolved when a dead child is given his rightful name and the land is gifted to its new guardian.

The dead child is the drowned Bubba, who the confused and grieving Koro Hohepa searches for daily on the margins of the sea.

**HOHEPA:** Such a confusing day, every memory lost. Even the green drop, the essence of you that once hung from my throat. Gone. *He holds his hands to his throat.*

**HOHEPA:** The clouds have covered the sea with their own image, and I can find nothing … So cold, so cold and all alone.

*Purapurawhetū*, act 1, scene 1

The loss of land in Kui’s own family has made her determined to protect the land that should rightfully have been Bubba’s.

**KUI:** … You know what happens to Māori when they got no land, no papa kāinga?

**TYLER:** Bums them right out.

**KUI:** Ae.

*KUI leaves the whare raranga, and transforms into the young AGGIE.*

**KUI:** They were a brow-beaten bunch. Aggie Rose never got so much as a cuddle, never a taste of breast milk. Grew up on a mixture of flour and water. So she developed these ways.

*Purapurawhetū*, act 2, scene 2

Looking forward: Theatre of the new millennium

Theatre in the new millennium has introduced other cultural voices to the New Zealand stage.

The Pacific Island Theatre Company, established in Auckland in the mid- 1980s, was the first theatre company to focus on the social concerns of Pasifika peoples. Pacific Underground was subsequently founded in Christchurch and incorporated some of the original Auckland company. Writers who have contributed to **a strengthening Pacific voice** in New Zealand theatre include:

* Oscar Kightley – (with David Fane), *A Frigate Bird Sings* (1996); *Dawn Raids* (1997); and (with Dave Armstrong), *Niu Sila* (2004)
* Toa Fraser – *Number 2* (1999)
* Albert Wendt – *The Songmaker’s Chair* (2004).

Albert Wendt (1952–) is an award-winning writer of novels, poetry, and short stories.

Wendt’s first play *The Songmaker’s Chair* (first produced in 2003, image 6) fulfills a promise to actor Nathaniel Lees to write a play for Sāmoan actors. *The Songmaker’s Chair* tells the story of a Sāmoan family whose father, in traditional matai fashion, will hand over the leadership of the family to his son Fa‘amu. The play mirrors various family conflicts but also its strengths. It deals with issues of interracial marriage and the place (and preservation) of traditional values in a new society.

The play begins with Peseola dreaming of a ghostly white owl. The sighting of the owl foreshadows impending death. While Peseola accepts this omen, the family try to downplay it.

**PESEOLA:** This time Lilo was in it.

**MALAGA:** It was only a dream.

**MATA:** It’s alright, Pese. Dreams are only dreams.

**TAPUA‘IGA:** Malaga, what does it mean?

**MALAGA:** An owl, it’s just an owl.

*The Songmaker’s Chair*, act 3, scene 1

After Peseola dies, his family gather about Fa‘amu, who now sits in the chair. Each in their different way affirms the family.

**LILO:** Papa, your songs will grow and live forever.

*The Songmaker’s Chair*, act 5, scene 4

The play concludes with a siva, a traditional dance used at the conclusion of an event.

**MALAGA** *(sings, the others join in):*

Fāliu le Lā ‘i lona tau afiafi  
Le Lā ‘o Sāmoa ua felanulanua‘i  
*The Songmaker’s Chair*, act 5, scene 4

New cultures, for example, from south-east Asia, are being heard in the theatre. Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s *Ka Shue* (1996) is a solo performance of multiple characters from a Chinese New Zealand family.

The Indian Ink Theatre Company, based on a collaboration between Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis, uses mask, puppetry, live music, and performers playing multiple roles to tell a trilogy of stories in which the central characters are Indian.

In their introduction to their collection of play texts, *Indian Ink*, Rajan and Lewis comment that:

Laughter is our Trojan horse. With it we are able to gain entry through the fortified gates of a cynical world. The soul is so much more easily nourished with a belly full of laughter.

*Indian Ink*, page 10

The social, cultural and political implications of each of the works are important and we are conscious of them, but our job as theatre makers is to tell the stories, to throw a light on the dark corners of humanity and to lead the audience into a new and exotic world, the world of the plays.

*Indian Ink*, page 15

While at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School in 1994, Rajan originally created *Krishnan’s Dairy* (image 3) as a twenty-minute performance monologue. He subsequently developed the monologue into a play (first produced in 1997) in collaboration with Justin Lewis.

In the following extract from *Krishnan’s Dairy*, a single performer (Jacob Rajan) plays both Gobi and Zina by swapping masks. He responds to an invisible customer with shifts from husband to polite shopkeeper. The dialogue is punctuated by soundscape elements of shop bells and baby cries.

**ZINA:** Enoda thesha ped-arudhaa. [*Don’t you get angry with me*.] Don’t raise your voice at me!

**GOBI:** This is my shop, I will raise my voice whenever I want to! *(Bell in.) BABY APU cries from the stockroom.* Good morning.

**ZINA:** Now you’ve gone and woken the baby.

**GOBI:** Zina, dear, Apu must be hungry, why don’t you look after him and I will serve the customer.

*Krishnan’s Dairy*, scene: The Shop (page 35)

There is also a movement for companies to create and present theatre in innovative styles. This involves moving away from authorial scripts to create new devised works or adapting established works through a collaborative process, for example, Theatre at Large’s work with Shakespearean classics and the Clinic’s work with multimedia.

The work of new young playwrights is often set in urban centres and captures the voice and issues of young contemporary New Zealanders. These playwrights include Duncan Sarkies, Stephen Sinclair, and Jo Randerson and Gentiane Lupi in *Cracks in the Garden*.

In “Perils of Perfection”, Jo Randerson writes:

There was a time when we knew that the very essence of being human involved having a few cracks and flaws … But now it seems like … we want clean, smooth, wrinkle-free lives … where we don’t have to look at anything ugly nor hear anything we don’t understand, where the formula we have been taught is played consistently without a note out of place.

Randerson, 2000, pages 8–9

Plays as forms of NZ Drama/theatre

The following question can be used to look closely at any text of a New Zealand play or extracts from it to focus in on particularly NZ features.

**Focusing question: What specifically represents New Zealand in this play?**

You might consider the following factors:

**Place**

Are specific place names used? Are these authentic? If the play offers a fictionalised idea of a type of place in New Zealand, what place and what aspects of place are suggested?

**Time, events and politics**

Are specific historical events mentioned? What and when? In what ways, and for which cultural groups, have these events been important in New Zealand’s history? What attitudes did, or do, various groups in society have to the event(s)?

**Period/era**

Is the play set in one or more particular times in New Zealand’s present or past? What aspects of the era(s) does the play focus on and reflect?

**Time of writing**

Is the play set in a different time from that in which it was written? If so, what social ideas of the time of writing may have impacted on the topics and theatrical style of the play?

**Historical characters**

Do any of the characters represent actual people in New Zealand’s past or present? How close to reality is their representation? If aspects of such characters have been highlighted or fictionalised, what is being suggested about the character?

**Character as part of social groups and political forces**

Do any of the characters, whether played as single characters, as ensemble, or in chorus roles, represent the ideas and behaviours of different social groups from New Zealand’s past or present?

**Culture**

Are cultural beliefs and practices specific to New Zealand’s different ethnic communities used in the play? If so, how: in the narrative actions, the theatrical design, the performance style, the dialogue?

**Performance styles**

Does the play include styles of performance that are distinctive to New Zealand? Does it include the traditional Māori performance styles of haka, waiata, whaikōrero? Does it include performance styles that are distinctive to other New Zealand cultural groups, such as movement, song, and storytelling from the Pasifika nations or movement, mask, and puppetry from Asian and southeast Asian nations?

**Language – te reo Māori and New Zealandisms**

Does the dialogue include te reo Māori? If so, is it translated by other characters or by the playwright? Is there a glossary? Is te reo used in casual conversation or in formal situations? Are words and phrases in te reo interspersed with English, or are there full dialogue tracts in Māori? Who speaks it and how fluently?

Are there usages of English that are peculiar to NZ and make specific links to our country? Often these will be colloquialisms. If so, what aspects of our culture do these expressions represent?

Is any of the language specific to New Zealand, for example, relating to our flora or fauna, or to social systems, such as the language of government and education?

**Features of NZ Theatre in Niu Sila**

Compiled by Chris Burton for PNBHS Drama 2007

Multi-cultural NZ comedy of manners; Pacifica/Pakeha juxtaposition; use of Samoan and contemporary slang; physical theatre; actors playing multiple roles with versatile physicality; stereotype spoofing; use of symbolic set and minimal props; importance of family; issues of racism and physical abuse; cross-cultural friendships; allusions to the 1980 dawn raids and recent Asian immigration.

**Realism**

Niu Sila is a great example of the NZ theatre form. It demonstrates a sense of realism which is universally within New Zealand as “Kiwis” of all ethnicities and backgrounds can relate to the unrealistically – realistic characters

**POLITICAL CONTENT**

**Land issues/social and racial discrimination**

The play gives us a really truthful account of the interaction between Pakeha and Pacific Islanders. For example, it doesn’t shirk from talking about negative aspects of the Pacific Island life (family violence, racism) as well as negative aspects of Pakeha society (racism, bigotry). For example, Ioane’s neighbor, Mrs Heathcote, is very racist, peering at them through the blinds and making negative comments.

The Pacific Island minister ‘Criminal’ is corrupt and Ioane’s Pakeha teacher refuses to put Ioane up a class because she assumes he is not as bright as Peter. Peter’s parents could be seen as well-meaning liberals of the urban eighties. The different cultures are shown by different social circumstances. Ioane’s parents take Peter to church and then enjoy a huge family lunch. Peter’s parents take Ioane to a classical concert. Society is seen as having different expectations for Pakeha and Pacific Islander. Peter gets a degree, Ioane gets a girl pregnant. However, at the end, their childhood friendship is not completely broken.

Both social and racial discrimination feature heavily in “Niu Sila”. Miss Hagan, Ioane’s teacher, holds him back at school as well as his family members because she believes them to be incapable of succeeding at school. “I’ve had a lot of experience with Maoris’, Islanders and other slower learners”. Ioane himself comments “those dumb Maoris, they are so bloody stupid”. This shows the double standards Islanders and Maoris have e.g. “I don’t want them Maoris messing up my house”, Mrs Tafioka says to Mrs Burton when she is explaining why her party is being held in the garage. Mrs Burton laughs at Mrs Tafioka’s double standards and tries to explain to her politely that this is how white people feel about Islanders (page 53).

Their neighbour, Mrs Heathcote, portrays a stereotypical white middle class society, who are set in their ways. Mrs Heathcote is convinced that Maoris and Islanders disrupt and cause harm to the community with their loud parties: “Islanders drink when they sing, that’s when they rape and murder”. Mrs Heathcote also believes that Islanders and Pakeha shouldn’t mix; this is shown when Mrs Heathcote finds out about Peter staying at the Tafiokas’ and tells Mrs Burton that “it is not healthy letting your boy play with those Islanders”.

These social interactions between Pacific Islanders and Pakeha in Niu Sila are an honest representation of how people discriminate against other races in New Zealand. Islanders, Maoris, Indians, Pakeha and even Chinese, are all races in the play whose different aspects of culture we see. The play ends with the concept that life is a never ending cycle of learning of new people and their cultures, when the new boy next door, Vincent, comes to play with Peter’s son. He comes from Hong Kong. It introduces the idea of the growth in Asian immigrants.

The Ponsonby area was once looked down upon when the Islanders settled there. Now Ponsonby is a flash, expensive area, and the Islanders can no longer afford it. This reflects the racial tensions in NZ society as it is such a diverse and mixed group of races.

**THEMATIC CONTENT**

**Exploration of cultural identity**

Niu Sila tells us about Pacific Island people immigrating to New Zealand in the late 20th century. The play starts in the 1990s and traces the impact of a Pacific Island family growing up in Ponsonby in the 1970s - 1980s. As such it represents a **fusion** of Pacifika and New Zealand dramatic culture. It also explores the effect on the Pakeha population and other cultures, such as Indian.

**Finding one’s own identity within a wider New Zealand society**

The Samoan song that Ioane and Peter sing at the beginning that then merges into a schoolyard rhyme, shows the “*acculturation*” that Ioane is experiencing, being influenced by, and merging, his Samoan heritage with Western customs.

The scenes showing the Indian Sports Cricket team show us that immigrants in Western cultures create their own mini communities within the wider community, in an effort to uphold their own customs.

Excessive whacking and hitting of Samoan culture is frowned upon by Western civilisation and illegal in European dominant NZ culture. Peter’s father, Mr Burton, who is an academic doesn’t believe in any corporal punishment for their children. New Zealand culture has the same kind of customs as the Samoan has, but we have some differences.

**USE OF LANGUAGE**

**Slang/colloquialisms/Kiwisms** – *spaz*”, “*dick*!”, “*boonga*” and “*seagull*”.

**Social differences in language use**

Compare, in Niu Sila, the language of Mrs Heathcote, Miss Hagan, and Mum to that of the boys and the Samoans; eg “Miss Hagan: It’s not up to you to interfere in the learning of another child.”; Ioane: “I’m a boonga.”; Uncle Pou: “It’s the ruckby”; Mrs T: “Foreign**s** Affair”

The hardships Ioane has been through shows in his adult voice, which has become cynical and his body language which has become defensive. Peter’s maturity and satisfaction with his life is evident in his assurance of voice and body.

Use of titles as reflections of N.Z. or to identify the place “Niu Sila”

-Niu Sila means New Zealand, but it shows N.Z. from a different point of view i.e. Samoan

New Zealand language and culture e.g. New Zealand accent and expressions e.g. Kiwisms - “She’ll be right”, “seagull” and casual speech, casual use of English, soft Island sounds. Dad exemplifies typical NZers with expressions such as “Jesus Christ!” and “Don’t be so bloody stupid!”

Samoans have their own way of saying English words eg: some Samoans’ pronounce words that start with “th” as “f” instead e.g. “fanks”, instead of “thanks”, “fing” instead of “thing”. Sometimes they tend to omit letters from their words and find some words difficult to pronounce: when Ioane uses a sentence with the word dollars he does not add the “s” when he talks e.g. 2 dollar, 5 dollar…Uncle Pou gave him twenty dollar” and also “ogay”, “ruckby”. White people are referred to as palagis by Samoans. Peter’s dad uses typical Kiwi swear words “Jesus Christ”, “bugger”, “bloody”.

Childish language – it is clear that Peter and Ioane are young children: when the boys ask each other questions they make cheeky answers back with “my dick” slang.

**USE OF CONVENTIONS** – universal features this NZ Drama has borrowed

**Narrative structure**

Niu Sila explores the process of life by structuring the telling of a story in an interesting way. It starts in the present which creates a strong link with the audience because they feel they can relate to the two characters. **Narration** is used throughout the whole play; Peter telling the story of the two boys’ childhood helps to explain some of the things that are happening in more depth and gives the play a foc using framework. His **monologues** are **spoken thoughts** interspersed with dialogue to convey extra information and his inner thoughts and emotions while also shifting time and place quickly. **Flashbacks** show the developing relationship of two boys, a Palangi and a Samoan, during the 1960s and 1970s, as they cope with growing up amid the prejudice and expectations of the society around them. **Chorus** is used when the class sing the “handkerchoof” song, emphasising their youth.

**Manipulating realism**

In Niu Sila a variety of conventions are used to manipulate realism in interesting and effective ways to create a light hearted, funny mood for the play while simultaneously subtly revealing the play’s more serious issue of racial discrimination.

**Slow motion** is used along with **spoken thoughts** in the scene with the Indian cricket team when Peter has the whole game resting on his shoulders. The effect of this combination is to create suspense and understanding of the characters’ inner actions and the subtext. As above, **flash forward/flash back** are used to structure the story effectively: an example of this is when Ioane has a **flashback** of his days on the island fishing. The effect of this is to create a sense of realism of the different lives of the two boys and also to show the effect that time has on relationships.

**Mix of tragedy/comedy or “verfremdungseffekt”**

Niu Sila is a very entertaining play with lots of humour in the characters and situations. However, its intent is serious in that it explores the truth about the interaction between Pakeha and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand in the 1980s. e.g. it talks about negative aspects of the Pacific Island life (family violence) as well as the negative aspects of Pakeha Society – for example, Ioane’s neighbour is racist, peering at them through the blinds and making negative comments. One moment we are laughing, the next we are being hit with the tragedy of the situation. Peter’s narration of Ioane’s death is both powerful and poignant.

**Stereotyping**

Niu Sila includes various alienation effects to stir the audience’s conscience. For example, in Niu Sila there are many stereotypes that are over exaggerated, like the Indian Cricket team with half the players named Patel, the Islanders always gambling and Ioane getting questioned by the police. These stereotypes are common for New Zealanders and make the audience think about their own lives and their own attitudes to different cultures in our society, instead of reinforcing these common stereotypes.

**Features of NZ Theatre in** Once on Chunuk Bair

Written by Chris Burton for PNBHS Drama 2010

**Place, time, events and politics**

Chunuk Bair is the site in Turkey, which, through huge historical NZ sacrifice and the bungling of out of touch British leadership, has become highly symbolic as an early step to our independent nationhood. The soldiers also think of home and mention faraway places such as “Taihape” and “Taupo” which root the play in NZ despite its foreign setting.

The differing attitudes of the characters come through clearly, with the extremes being Harkness’s devotion to Britain as “home” versus the pragmatic pioneer, Connolly, a New Zealander through and through who would “give an arm to have Mustafa Kemal” as his commander rather than the dysfunctional British.

There is great irony in the “victory” of the Wellingtons seizing Chunuk Bair – the Kiwis did not receive the support of British troops that was promised and it seems Malone was probably killed by fire from a “supporting” British warship.

**Time of writing**

Written in 1982, the play fits squarely into that era when NZ literature, including Drama, was pushing for its own voice, with a deliberate attempt to speak our own stories and counter the strong prevailing influence of international drama.

**Historical characters**

Colonel Connolly is based on Lieutenant Colonel William Malone, a Kiwi icon at Gallipoli for his concern for his men and strategic ability. When ordered by Brigadier General Johnston, and having just seen the Aucklands being decimated he refused to allow his men to make a further suicidal charge on Chunuk Bair in daylight. 'I'm not going to send them over to commit suicide,' Malone said and Johnston agreed that the attack be delayed until before dawn. Malone's battalion seized Chunuk Bair on 8 August when there was little opposition.

Bassett is based on the real life man, Corporal C R G Bassett who received the V.C. for his courage in laying out and maintaining telephone wire communications under fire on Chunuk Bair.

**Character as part of social groups and political forces**

The characters represent a cross section of contemporary New Zealand men – Sergeant Frank the communist-leaning unionist, Connolly the farmer strikebreaker, Scruffy the musterer, Mac the rep rugby player, George the marginalized Maori…

**Culture**

The characters generally reflect the male dominated era of the times with much reference to the pioneering experience and quite strong reference to rugby both literally in reference to Mac and as a metaphor by Connolly for the situation the Wellingtons find themselves in on Chunuk Bair.

**Language – te reo Māori and New Zealandisms**

Otaki George is the lone Maori voice and quite a lot is packed into his racial stereotype from his quick wit and laid back approach, to his direct raising of racial issues yet standing strongly beside his Pakeha brothers-in-arms. His use of te reo really only finds any kindred spirit in Connolly’s admiration of Te Rauparaha. The fact he is such a lone voice only emphasizes the alien situation the Maori “Pioneers” he belonged to must have found themselves in, fighting the white man’s war, and the huge loyalty evident through their sacrifice in particular.

Driven, perhaps, by the humorous sarcasm of Porky, the men’s language is rife with Kiwisms and colloquialisms, though much of it is obsolete now.

**Appendix**

An excerpt from the speech at the Chunuk Bair ANZAC Day service by Hon Sir Anand Satyanand, GNZM, QSO, Governor-General of New Zealand, 12.30pm local time 25 April 2009

“But its (the Gallipoli campaign’s) symbolism for New Zealanders has never died. In his play, *Once on Chunuk Bair,* New Zealand playwright Maurice Shadbolt recounted the taking of the summit. He imagined the following response by New Zealand’s Colonel to a British general’s enquiry about progress :

*“Tell him some scarecrows called Wellington Infantry have taken Chunuk Bair. No. Tell him, God damn it, that New Zealand has taken Chunuk Bair. Tell him New Zealand is holding Chunuk Bair.”*

But fatefully, the message never got through—the carefully laid telephone line had gone dead.

The men who scaled Chunuk Bair had joined the war to fight as a part of a bigger Imperial plan. However, they died on its summit as New Zealanders. As field ambulance officer Ormond Burton recounted some 20 years later: *“The way men died on Chunuk is shaping the deeds yet to be done by generations still unborn … When the August fighting died down there was no longer any question but that New Zealanders had commenced to realise themselves as a nation*.”

**Features of NZ Theatre in Shuriken** by Vincent O’Sullivan

Written by Chris Burton for PNBHS Drama 2011

**Historical background, place, time, events and politics**

Shuriken is set in the Japanese POW camp at Featherston in the Wairarapa during WWII. It is based around the “incident” which saw the NZ garrison open fire killing 48 prisoners and one Kiwi and was significant in bringing this event to the notice of many New Zealanders who were unaware of it.

In February 1943, tensions in the Featherston camp in New Zealand increased after the arrival of a large contingent of prisoners captured after naval battles in the seas around Guadalcanal. Several junior officers from [Furutaka](http://www.pacificwrecks.com/ships/ijn/furutaka.html) led other hardliners and more moderate prisoners in a strike over labour conditions.

On February 25, 1943, Lt. Adachi Toshio, led a sit down protest to work detail. Frightened New Zealand guards opened fire on the protesters and one of the Japanese officers was shot by the camp’s deputy commander, Lieutenant Malcolm. In response, a melee broke out with 240 rebellious prisoners rioting. When it ended, one New Zealander was dead, Private Wattie Pelvin, and 48 Japanese POWs were dead and many wounded.

The Japanese government protested the “massacre” of unarmed nationals at Featherston – without directly referring to them as “prisoners of war” – the New Zealand court of inquiry cleared the camp authorities of any blame, though it did feel the “extreme action of Lieutenant Malcolm” was the immediate act of provocation. Adachi Toshio survived, was repatriated to Japan where he was to become a minister and visited Featherston in 1986 on a mission of remembrance and goodwill.

**First and foremost, Shuriken presents the immense cultural conflict which lay at the heart of the actual incident but it does so in a strictly unbiased voice which acknowledges misunderstanding and error on both sides:**

Japanese POW’s (particularly those who had been fighting men) were well schooled in the Imperial doctrine that surrender brought terrible shame upon oneself and one’s family; death (even by their own hand) was far more honourable. Their war code included no instructions on how to behave when captured as it was not considered an option. The Japanese expected the Kiwi garrison would treat them as harshly as their military treated allied POWs and struggled to understand why they did not – in fact they saw it as a sign of weakness in their guards. The more extreme believed they would never be able to return to their families and indeed many changed their names at repatriation time to avoid disgracing their loved ones. The guide at the Featherston Museum pointed out that this created confusion the first time some POWs returned in recent decades as the kiwi organisers were using their original names but those who had changed names did not want to be addressed by these.

Against this was set the mindset of a garrison of very much second line troops who were often too old or unfit for frontline duties and who had had no training in how to handle the immense cultural difference between the two races, let alone the specifics of the vastly different Japanese attitude to capture. Initially the garrison was unaware of the Imperial doctrine and its effect on the POWs and so understanding came slowly and never entirely; the average Kiwi in the 1940s had had little or no experience of any culture outside our country. We were very insular compared to 2011, not only physically but also psychologically. Add to this the unnatural tensions of wartime and there was a dominant attitude among the guards that this was their patch and there was no need for them to make any undue effort to “understand” foreigners who were, after all, prisoners, and whose country had initiated hostilities in the region.

**The Monologues and the Language**

Source: http://phillipmann.co.nz/essays/essay-2/

*One feature of the play which came into prominence during the rehearsals was the monologues. These began as scenes, but at some point in the rehearsal, they became direct address to the audience. Thus, almost like a classic soliloquy, the monologues gave us direct access to the mind, and hence nature, of the character speaking. They also allowed O’Sullivan to write for the rhythm and voice of the actor, and on all occasions this proved most effective*

*Pom’s soliloquy, for example, took the form of a crude shaggy-dog story about a corpse that sang ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ through its arse-hole. This, delivered while Pom is standing next to a dead prisoner.*

*Jacko’s monologue was his inspiring speech to the bewildered Japanese prisoners – in this case, by extension, the audience – on the basic rules of rugby. The Commander of the PoW Camp has suggested that the morale of the prisoners might be improved if they learned to play rugby, and it is Jacko’s task to teach them. After explaining to them that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, at three o‘clock, they are, ‘going to learn to think like white men for thirty minutes each way,’ he goes on to give them an overview of the game. ‘The guts of the game is to beat the living shit out of the other side until only one of yous is still on your feet. That is what we call tactics. Because whether you lot like it or not, we are going to civilize you. Right? Right!‘ Whether this scene has any basis in reality I do not know, but its comic quality brought relief while still revealing the gulf in understanding that separated the two nations.*

*Ernie’s soliloquy is a sustained cry of pain and bewilderment. It is, in some ways, the most pivotal for it is Ernie who at the end of the play has control of the machine gun. He is holding a letter from his wife. She has, as the colloquial Jacko puts it, “shot through”. Ernie is devastated by the news and likens the occasion to when, as a boy, he innocently ate the meat from a calf he had adopted as a pet, one that he loved. From that moment on, as he says, he knew there was evil in the world. This soliloquy marks Ernie as a man to be watched, a man suffering in extremis, certainly not a man to be trusted with a machine gun.*

*However, it was Tai’s monologue which stunned the audience on the opening night.. Tai, the Maori soldier, is not present in the opening scenes. He has compassionate leave and has gone up country to be with his family. His brother-in-law, a pakeha, ‘a good bloke’ as he says, has been captured while serving in the armed forces. He has been executed by the Japanese. Tai’s sister is in extreme grief and just sits turning her ring on her finger. When Tai returns to the camp he is filled with both grief for a brother in law that he liked and anger at an enemy who has, in a way, wounded his sister. He would like to take revenge.*

**Time of writing (1985)**

Again, this emerges in the period when the “NZ voice” is being actively searched for, and, presenting an important historical event, the details of which were clouded by the restrictions of official secrecy for many years, it has a unique place.

**Historical characters**

There are some vague, similarities, most notably between the Commandant and the contemporary commanding officer, Lt Col. DH Donaldson, whose “…priorities included implementing the Geneva Prisoners of War Convention, in particular Article 27, which outlined the obligation of all physically fit POWs, other than officers, to work.” (Source?). However, the only character carried directly across is the Japanese officer, Lt. Adachi.

**Character as part of social groups and political forces; language**

It is this area that Shuriken reflects a cross section of contemporary NZ adult male society with some strong, recognizable contemporary stereotypes. It is presented through the somewhat artificial hierarchy of the Army, but because the characters are forced to share barracks and duties in a confined environment, they are forced to interact in an intense manner they would be unlikely to have done in real life. This contrived medium allows the playwright to focus on the cultural issues around which the play revolves – and this includes Pakeha:Maori, generational resident:newer immigrant as well as the predominant NZ’er:Japanese.

Jacko emerges as the typical rural Kiwi “bloke” of his era – raw-boned, physically strong, limited in experience and outlook beyond his own experiences, a fond of a drop, confident in his own ability but would never brag and for which he despises Pom (p23); empathetic of others in an awkward way with a sense of social justice which sees him stand up for the under-dog (Charlie, Ernie); used to being independent, he shows a vague distrust of authority (rugby lesson). He has no understanding of foreign cultures (p25)and no great desire to do so (p59), simply wanting to be left alone to do his thing in his place and not seeing why he should have to understand (p58-9).

**Language**: reflects his down to earth nature and supports his limited but forceful opinions with swearing (“bloody”, “fucken”, “shit”, “bugger”,) and the contemporary colloquialism of the working man’s world (“tucker”, the old snake charmer”, “the sack”, “cobber”, “lingo”, “holy roller”, “shaggers”…).

Pom is Jacko’s antithesis on the surface: full of himself with little or no regard for his colleagues and a racist abhorrence of the Japanese – he represents the foreigner who does not fit into the Kiwi way of life; in the response his character draws from Jacko (p23), he also demonstrates the Kiwi trait of disliking vanity and talking oneself up. As a barber he represents a contemporary stereotype of the small-town small man at the centre of male gossip by virtue of his occupation; his insecurity (perhaps at his inability to be accepted as a real Kiwi?) is cloaked by vain meticulousness in his personal grooming (moustache) and an unending repartee of jokes. Although a NZ resident for most of his life, his arrogant demeanour allows the others to quickly ostracise him as an unwanted outsider though there is great irony in his final humanitarianism. His role does give place to a vague but long held resentment Kiwis have held for the English – this may stem from the inept British leadership in WWI for which many Kiwi soldiers paid with their lives. Although NZ was far from a bicultural society at this time, Pom’s outrageous attitude towards Tai ensures the others close ranks against him. However he does reveal to Jacko that this impression of him which dominates the play is to some extent a façade (p48).

**Language**: cf Jacko, mixes some more sophisticated vocabulary which is usually delivered in a sarcastic tone and reflects his vanity and sense of superiority (“dignity”, “smidgin”) with excessive swearing/colloquialism/sexual references (“fucken”, “pansy”, “arse-licking”, “the pricker”). This contrast tends to undermine the superiority and expose the facade.

Ernie is the slightly naïve small businessman, strong in his Christian faith and completely out of his comfort zone guarding foreign POWs. Perhaps he sees in their situation some equivalence to the trauma he experienced at his uncle’s hands as a youngster because his Christian decency drives him to make communication and share with them the understanding he has found through his faith. He is fundamentally a good person, striving to make some sense of a NZ experience way beyond his ken. His shock at his uncle’s revelation highlights a gap in NZ between the coalface experiences of farm children used to seeing animals slaughtered and those of the sheltered “townies” whose first contact with meat is sanitary and euphemistic. It would seem that there may be some cumulative effect of his uncle’s revelation, his outlook on life and his wife’s departure which culminate in his massacring the POW’s with the machine gun.

**Language:** as the softer, naïve, religious stereotype, Ernie avoids swearing and blasphemy and has a sense of integrity. With Jacko and Pom he reveals a contemporary homophobia (p36) and is shocked by the suicide. Ernie is perhaps a metaphor for NZ’s great quest for identity at a time when traditional bonds between us and the UK were facing transition; indeed in the years between the setting of the play and its actual writing, the myth of England as “home” had totally vanished in a political sea of British agricultural protection at the expense of Kiwi markets, the ANZUS defence agreement and a growing presence of the US in the media. Thus, bible in hand, Ernie strives to find meaning in the various complexities of camp life he finds himself thrust into which are well beyond his experience. While Christianity does help him to make some communication with the POW’s, ironically it brings more confusion than light to both them and Ernie.

Tai’s character could be seen as authorial tokenism – the mandatory Maori role ensuring the minorities are covered and throwing in some te reo for the lefties. He is marginalized by the playwright as he flits around the edges of the plot, dealing with his sister’s tragedy and having minimal interaction with the others. Could this be a metaphor for the contemporary role of Maori in NZ? Certainly from a social perspective, they were heavily marginalized in the 1940s prior to the explosion in the export meat industry which drew them into the new urban factories and forced Pakeha to be more aware of their presence; though the Maori battalion had earned much kudos in battle, its soldiers returned home to largely rural settlements with very poor facilities and a country whose halls of political and economic power were totally dominated by Pakeha. Such is the mana of his monologue, including his use of te reo, that it is tempting to see this moving incursion as an authorial hint at just what the tangata whenua have to offer – a richness which has been developed and accepted significantly more since 1985 . A full discussion of this character would include some knowledge of the his use of specific phrases of te reo.

Thus Shuriken is important for its unbiased exploration of a unique NZ event. Through it we see the effects of cultural non- or mis-understanding. Though it may have been set in the 1940s and written in the 1980s, the lesson remains highly relevant in the 21st century as similar experiences are played out on the global stage; one might ask, “Whatever happened to the benefit of hindsight?”

**Foreskin’s Lament as an example of the form of NZ Drama/Theatre**

Compiled by Chris Burton drawing on various sources including Simon Ferry. Michael Neill’s forward to the text is essential reading too.

Foreskin’s Lament captures very accurately a slice of NZ life which developed in the post WWII era, only to be shattered by the 1981 Springbok Tour just a year after it was first performed. It delivers to us the archetypal small town society where horizons are limited for most by the realities of the job, the mortgage, the wife and kids. This produced, for many in those days of relatively limited media access, a narrow focus on the world; a state of being largely content and “safe” within the occupational opportunities and social expectations of the local community. A major centre of the “local” social world common to every town was the Rugby Football Club. Rugby union was unchallenged as the major sporting code and reached a near-spiritual quality in its place at the very core of our national identity with the rugby clubhouses the centres of worship; they offered weekend escape from the humdrum working world in a generation where shops were often shut on Saturdays and always on Sundays; they offered a chance to achieve status; further recognition could be gained with representation at provincial or national levels; they offered the opportunity for males to enjoy camaraderie and the satisfaction of shedding blood and sweat (but definitely no tears) chasing a common physical goal with their mates, followed by socialising which *sometimes* included their families. On the darker side clubs provided some men with an acceptable reason to escape from the responsibilities of their families and retreat to a world where man ruled, physically on the field and vocally in the clubrooms - God help the woman who tried to upset the patriarchal dominance - the ladies’ place was firmly in the kitchen.

When it was first performed, some in the rugby world were offended by Foreskin’s Lament, seeing it as an orchestrated attack on our national sport. We must remember that Greg McGee was an accomplished rugby player himself. He played for Otago, the South Island, New Zealand Universities and the Junior All Blacks. He was twice an All Black trialist. Although it did not make him popular with some of the rugby fraternity, his was very much a view from the inside at the time and undoubtedly has credibility. Some 30 years later, its perspective may surprise or even shock but we must also realise that rugby of the time was the product of many social factors. Not least among them were our rugged pioneering history and predominantly male sacrifice and mateship through two World Wars. The war connection is clearly made by Tupper for whom the team represents an extension of that relatively “simple” time when life and indeed survival meant hanging out with your mates and standing shoulder to shoulder to beat a clearly defined enemy, a time when complicated issues such as meaningful relationships with women could be avoided. Note his Labelling Clean as a “traitor”.

So Foreskin’s Lament can be held up as an iconic NZ Drama for the following reasons:

* It explores various NZ social issues – the social role/influence of small town rugby before the 1981 Springbok Tour NZ and also patriarchy, politics in sport, mateship, individualism, education and prejudice.
* The sub-text is initially revealed through a series of awkward relationships between characters who reflect the NZ social spectrum:

youth v older age, formal education v practical/local experience, change v the status quo. Tupper features as the gruff but likeable father-figure (reminiscent of a generation of NZ parents for whom Foreskin-like talkative children were to be seen and not heard). Larry’s embarrassment at jibes at his possible homosexuality is dominated by his desire for mateship which pulls him, perhaps surprisingly, into this highly macho world; he is the self-appointed mother-figure, tidying up after his charges, nurse-maiding their injuries and defending the morality of the “family” from self-destruction. Foreskin’s is the Homerian voice of youthful challenge. Clean is naked ambition, (even if he purports it is fuelled altruistically and ironically by concern for his family) and Moira’s direct liberalism his antithesis.

* It is written in authentic, naturalistic language which heavily reflects our country and this male world of rugby. It is naturalistic dialogue using New Zealand idioms and accents eg..: the constant colloquialism “a bang on the bonker” (Larry to Ken), strong sexual allusion as a form of humour and male joshing “…has a sheep ever started looking a bit, you know attractive?” (Irish to Mean), heavy use of (sometimes) offensive swearing “shit, fuck” (various), bastardisation of words to satirise eg “ univarsity” (Clean to Foreskin) and rugby jargon such as positional names and tactics.
* Social attitudes – Tupper, the returned serviceman whose identity, rooted in the rugby team, is threatened by change such as Foreskin represents; Foreskin has turned his back on local jobs and gone away for an education but returned with a new independent objectivity through which he sees things differently; the fiercely ambitious Clean for whom the attraction of rugby is not Tupper’s quaint ‘tradition” but a means to status and success – to achieve which he has no scruples
* The tendency to use informal nicknames rather than someone’s proper first name. Note the symbolism of each of these and of Foreskin’s real name, Seymour. The only characters without nicknames are those who represent something beyond this enclave – Moira as a woman and Larry as a possible homosexual.