
FORTY YEARS OF CENTREPOINT THEATRE: THE HISTORY ACCORDING TO HAWES

BY PETER HAWES

joyful and triumphant BOUNCERS
Five go Balmy in Palmy HITS OF 74
CONJUGAL RITES *cunt daisy*
MIDDLE AGE SPREAD ART
ladies night PALANGI LOI
GUANTANAMO COALTOWN BLUES
STOCKCARS: THE MUSICAL
THE MOTOR CAMP THE RAT
CRIMES OF THE HEART
THE LEARNER'S STAND
daylight atheist
MICHAEL JAMES MANAIA
noises off NO. 2 Foreskin's Lament
PENALTIES, PINTS & PIROUETTES
BLACK COMEDY *an unreasonable fall of snow*
Under Milk Wood TRASH LULLABY JOCK LOOK BACK IN ANGER

THE NEWBURY HALL DANCES
LOVELOCK'S DREAM RUN
MOTHERS AND FATHERS
TRAFFORD TANZI
STEAMING
Shirley Valentine
THE PHILANTHROPIST
Blue Sky Boys
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
Shop 'til you drop



centrepoint
THEATRE

FORTY YEARS OF CENTREPOINT THEATRE: THE HISTORY ACCORDING TO HAWES

Peter Hawes has been associated with Centrepoint Theatre for two decades, as an actor and playwright. Two of his plays – *Aunt Daisy: The Musical* and *The Gods of Warm Beer* have been staged at Centrepoint. He is also a former television reporter and presenter and a novelist and short story writer. In 2011 he won Best Performance in a Short Film at the Aotearoa Film and Television Awards for his role in *BIRD*.



“PATRONS ARE REQUESTED NOT TO SMOKE DURING THE PERFORMANCE.” This plea first appeared on a Centrepoint Theatre programme in 1977 meaning, presumably, that the preceding 33 plays at Centrepoint Theatre had been viewed through a fug of tar, nicotine, carbon monoxide, ammonia, acrolein, nitrogen oxide, pyridine, cyanide vinyl chloride, N-nitrosatimylamine and acrylonitrile. (But ciggy smoke forms into interesting straitnes, doesn't it? like layer cake, very – atmospheric – shall we say; especially suited to Noel Coward plays which were then much in vogue.)

Forty years later, non-smoking Centrepoint Theatre could say this about itself: “We have produced more than 300 main bill productions, employed more than 2500 actors, directors and designers and injected more than six million dollars into the Palmerston North economy. We have produced more New Zealand plays than any other theatre and were the first company to present (in 1993) a whole year of NZ plays. In our 40 years we have used 10,000,000 nails screws and brads, 60,000 litres of paint, over 50,000 light bulbs, 30,000 sheets of ply, 80,000 metres of timber and 6,000 batteries.”

In fact Centrepoint Theatre effectively began its life in November 1973 at 81 George St which had been a music club called The Boulevard, “closed down for various misdemeanours”, presumably sex, drugs, pointed shoes and leather jackets. These were the days, after all, that closely succeeded bodgies, widgies and the hysterical Mazengarb Report on teenage sex. The landowner of the club premises said if someone could pay off the “previous encumbrance” they could pick up the lease. A trust lead by one Don Hampton did so and 81 in George Street came into existence.



George Street Exterior

Centrepoint started with a first production of *An Evening with Katherine Mansfield* starring Pat Evison. It ran, as intended, for three nights – the furthest, perhaps, that the uber-ample Ms Evison had ever run in her life. Having a bulimiac played by an endomorph was curious enough to ensure three bulgingly full houses and Centrepoint central was off to a flying start.

The theatre was remembered as a “roughly 80 seater”, (extremely roughly, with iron chairs laid in about five rows) but easily manipulated if the lady in front of you refused to remove her hat. There were cushions available – invariably not enough. Punters for the 8:00pm show would arrive at 7:00pm in order to ensnare one of the pads and also to partake of a dinner cooked by Diane Thorstensen who created superb three course fares in a tiny kitchen, the food served by volunteer waiters in exchange for a free show.

An early menu:

- French Onion Soup
- Chicken Paulette
- Cheesecake
- Coffee.

“For its time the food was new, and somewhat daring. A sample menu might be pumpkin soup with cumin, a homemade bread roll, Hungarianian goulash followed by cheesecake and coffee.” These were the words of Paul Minifie, second Artistic Director.

John Watson - an early pioneering actor (who joined up in 1976 then departed after some years to drive trucks, do OE, teaching English in Portugal and return 30 years later in Carl Nixon's *The Raft*) was most impressed with Minifie: "He did a monumental job. He seemed to handle everything, often down to choosing the colour of the napkins in the theatre-restaurant tables." Watson remembered another menu - "Mushroom sautéed in white wine and garlic served on Vogel's bread with mozzarella with crusty rolls; Main, savoury vegetarian samosas or marinated skewered and grilled lamb; dessert, date, rum and raisin pie." Food was the music of lovely theatre back then.

But there were drawbacks to Centrepont-on-George. On rainy nights canny followers knew not to sit *there* or *there* because the roof leaked. Minifie remembers this well: "The George St building, in spite of its charm, crush and ambience, was to have a limited life. The upstairs dressing room on the roof had to be approached through a river of flowing water when it rained."

The great former Artistic Director Alison Quigan also remembers the building well. Long before she had any connection with the theatre she was receptionist for 2ZA, just down the road in George Street. "These gypsy-like people would come in to talk on air about their plays. It was across the road from Norm Moore's garage – George Street was no flash part of town in those days."

(Those gypsy-like folk were the actors Michael Morrissey, Faye Flegg, Ray Edkins, Sherril Cooper, John Watson, David McKenzie, Hilary Beatson, Arthur Ranford, Peter Dennett, Margaret Blay, Claire Oberman, Millie Kerfoot and Tony Wahren.)

But Centrepont Theatre had lift-off; it was set to fly. Oh, and nearly crash on occasion.

The idea for a Palmerston North professional theatre had occurred to a group of ardent theatre-goers – Brian and Faye Flegg, John Quince, Bill Borlase and the said Don Hampton, credit manager at the PDC department store, and his wife Diane. The ardents met on 20th April 1973 at a local dance studio across the road from 81.

The conversation must have gone something like this:

FAYE: We are ardent theatre-goers.

BILL: But there's a problem.

QUINCE: Indeed there is!

DIANE: We haven't got a theatre to ardently go to.

As it happens Don Hampton (an ardent fan of Italian anarchist Dario Fo, as becomes relevant later) had been previously involved in setting up a professional theatre in Australia and by November 1973 he'd done it again, at the ex-Boulevard. Here's an extract from the first ever Centrepont newsletter: *The Theatre/restaurant is owned and managed by the trust board incorporated under the Charitable Trust Act of 1957. The structure follows closely that adopted by Downstage Theatre Wellington. Miss Margery Webster and Professors John Dunmore and Keith Thompson have accepted invitations to become patrons. The Board of Trustees consists of Martin Van Hale (Chairman), Brian Flegg (Secretary), June Bendall, Chris Davy, David Breton, John Dawick, Ern Joyce, Alan Millar, Rolf Panny, Ron de Roo, Jackson Smith and Hugh Williams.*

Number 81 was originally opened as a restaurant in order to generate the dosh to develop the theatre – then, **January 22nd 1974** with a \$2000 support grant from the QEII Arts Council, the doors opened on the first full season – Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist*. Then followed *Sweet Eros and Good Day* (McNally & Peluso), *Wind in the Branches of the Sassafras Tree* (de Obaldia), *A Day in the Life of Joe Egg* (Nichols), *The First Night of Pygmalion* (Hugget), *Old Times* (Pinter), *The End of the Golden Weather* (Mason – NZ at last!), *The Real Inspector Hound* (Stoppard – and the play that Paul Minifie was hired to perform in), *The Nuns* by Manet (not the real one), *An Infinite Number of Monkeys* (Moore), *Don't Let Summer Come* (Feely), *The Nobodies From Nowhere* (Gateway Theatre), and *Private Lives* by Noel Coward.

Thirteen plays! In one year! All viewed through nicotine haze.

Apart from Wellington's pioneer Downstage, Centrepont was the only restaurant/theatre in the land which Minifie accredits as a factor in its initial success: "I believe the food operation sustained and helped develop the theatre in the town and vice versa. It



George Street Restaurant

was produced for about \$1.50 per head! Its importance can be noted by the fact that during production week, tarpaulins used to cover up the building mess so that lunch could be served to the public.”

Alan Millar the only extant local founder attributes the initial vision of a provincial theatre to the aforementioned Don Hampton: “He wanted to create three companies, one for the public, one for schools and the other for factories.” (And here’s the connection with Dario Fo – the Don Hampton system was directly borrowed from Fo’s set-up in Italy.) Millar, a much respected former official with the PSA, adds that paying the actors professional Actors Equity rates, was also a given. “And we did that from the beginning.”

Now, you must trust to a little artistic imagery here because Artistic Directors –who are all highly motivated and respected folk, assuredly – behave in the nature of – well, let’s just say some are floaters, others are sinkers. A sinker does not by any means denote a failure – often quite the obverse – but some skim across the surface whilst others remain resolutely in the brownish depths. Let us give you examples: first, Alison Quigan the insuperable Queen of Church/Pitt corner is on record as saying Centrepont is a quintessentially unsnobbish theatre “where people can see and celebrate New Zealand and people like themselves” - and was able to leave such plumbeous clunkers as *Not Christmas but Guy Fawkes*, *Welcome to Andromeda* and *Look Back in Anger* to hardworking others. For she was a floater, she made things happen easily.

Way before her was the outsized, inspirational gadfly Paul Minifie who, with his insistence on such problematic plays as *Wind in the Branches*, *A Day in the Life of Joe Egg*, *The Nobodies from Nowhere* etc made life as difficult as hard sums – he was a sinker. This writer remembers watching him labour faultlessly through the three hour and a half hours of Brecht’s plumbeous *Galileo* at Downstage, then collapse - as we applauded him with what remained of our reserves - into the same exhaustion as he’d hauled us all into. He made the job hard but inexorably noble.

Paul Minifie took over the role of Centrepont boss in June, 1974 - “I was engaged to play one of the (brilliantly witty) critics in *The Real Inspector Hound*. The cast included professional and local amateur performers and was directed by Dianne Woods.” Of course it included amateurs – there was nowhere that a professional – between Wellington and Auckland - could have been otherwise engaged – there was no other professional theatre. Cripes, in the whole of NZ at the time there was hardly any professional theatre at all. Court Theatre was two years old, Downstage, NZ’s oldest, had opened in the last days of 6pm closing and Auckland’s Mercury had been extant since 1968. There were two professionals in PN in those days - Sherril Cooper and David McKenzie. Other professionals? Search the back page of *Truth*; therein resided the only professionals in town.



George Street Dressing Room

And the venue was as difficult as the plays. “The George Street venue”, continues Minifie, “was tiny, with the dressing rooms outside – down the alley and onto the roof where there was a small flat.”

An expert in producing difficult plays in difficult venues was required – and Minifie was the man.

“During the season (of *Hound*) I was greatly surprised to be visited by two board members who offered me the position of Artistic Director. I was young (27) and ambitious and excited by the prospect and readily accepted. I spent six weeks on a Q.E.II grant, visiting Australian theatres, and then started at Centrepont in August, 1974,” he says.

There had already been a cascade of three-week seasons by then, beginning with *The Philanthropist* by Chris Hampton (later to film write *Chariots of Fire* and *Dangerous Liaisons*). It featured the lovely (and paid) David McKenzie as well as Don Hampton, Sue Cherrington, Bernard McBride and Sherril Cooper. McKenzie was not only in this first George Street production but also, some years later, in *Twelfth Night*, the introductory production at the Church/Pitt Street building when the theatre moved thither. (Which very vaguely puts one in mind of the Chamberlain’s Men. When the lease ran out on Shakespeare’s theatre and he hauled it across the frozen Thames in the mini Ice Age, to have it rebuilt in Southwark by Peter Small in 1597. It was also, by the way, a brothel and gambling den.) Centrepont apoplectically maintains *it* was not.

Business management was by Brian Flegg “and the glamorous Colynette Patrick. Money was always short and dinner and show tickets were cheap – about \$5.50. “As always, performers, crews and volunteers subsidised the art,” says Minifie.



***The Philanthropist*
1974**

The Philanthropist was a brilliant play, (seen, years earlier in London, by this writer who was spat upon by Alec McCowan at the Royal Court Theatre, London, resultant from a particularly potent plosive). Everything in the play is not what it seems - at either the dinner party or the bedrooms in which six protagonists end up, after accepting or offering “lifts home”. Philanthropy began the next day...

It was a great play and a great choice; Palmerston North in `74, shoe-horned itself into the narrow precincts of Centrepont-on-George to laugh and cheer.

So 81 George Street began with thunderous acclamation. However, as mentioned above, the play ran for a mere three weeks. As did all early Centrepont plays. The relatively short seasons account for the astonishing number of productions in the early days of the theatre. Another feature was how many of them were “foreign” – (ie non-NZ). There were twelve - the outsider being Bruce Mason’s *The End of the Golden Weather*. (Twelve and one outsider, is there a Last Supper element here? It was a restaurant theatre after all.)

Inspired by the aforementioned Dario Fo, a second company of Centrepont, CENTREPOINT 2, was established in 1974 in Broadway Avenue. The venture, ably managed artistically by Director Sue Lister, was touted as a theatre workshop for toddlers through to older teenagers to learn the basics of drama. The children’s theatre attracted hordes of 5 – 11 year olds each term. Centrepont 2’s first production *The Nobodies from Nowhere* was written by Paul Minifie was described by a reviewer as “delightfully fresh and informal”.

1976: A dance, a kiss, an accidental brushing of a glass unicorn, causing it to fall and break its horn: it was this play, *The Glass Menagerie*, that set Alison Quigan on a career course. “I was captivated by John Watson’s performance: ‘I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve...’ I guess it was my first experience of a play that truly said things I knew about – family.”

Don Hampton lasted less than a year as Artistic Director which is not all that surprising when you’re confronted with the production of 13 plays a year for the foreseeable future. He fled to the USA and thus the curtain came down on his short but notable career - and uprose to reveal Paul Minifie who found himself confronted by a theatre too small and about to get considerably smaller – it was to be demolished.

In cahoots with fund-raiser James Mutch who found \$11,000 from somewhere – probably, improbably enough, from Internal Affairs Capital Grants. His methods were guided by the Committeeman’s Guide (“seeking gifts by telephone or letter is



***A Day in the Death
of Joe Egg* 1974**

the WORST WAY to make an approach; visit only prospects whose cards you hold, keep your sights high...")

But that sum was a mere drop in the collection bucket; much more was required - \$160,000 in fact. It would be delivered, vowed Mutch, by 18 August 1977.

So Artistic Director Paul Minifie became the most multi-tasked man in the Manawatu; he directed, acted, set-built, operated lighting while also seeking new premises, organising a fund-drive to pay for it, and moving the whole shebang from central-city George St into the ex-railway workshops/steel equipment factory/children's model museum on the corner of Pitt and Church. There were some grumbles from patrons – “too impersonal, too far away.” The theatre was under threat of being renamed Off-Centrepoint Theatre). But it was 8000 square feet – big. And big is good.

However, not all problems had been solved: “About a fortnight following the opening night the roof gutters were overcome by a deluge and a blocked pipe resulted in 7000 square feet of carpet being saturated.” The floods had also migrated from George to Church St. “What did we do? Cleaned up the goddam mess and kept going,” says Minifie.

So here we are, **1978**, the corner of Church and Pitt – angry police cars screaming down Church St through every production, drama o'erwhelmed each weekend by stock cars at the park, but home. HOME; with a ghost that had either accompanied the floods to the new home or had had unfinished business since the days of renovating steam trains (though the spectre was a woman. – I met her. She walked through me - it was like a bolt of cold lightning).

Here's the dramatis personae of the new Centrepoint Theatre (which we promise is the only time such a protracted list will appear):

Director: Paul Minifie.

Associate Director: Murray Lynch.

Business Manager: Colynette Patrick.

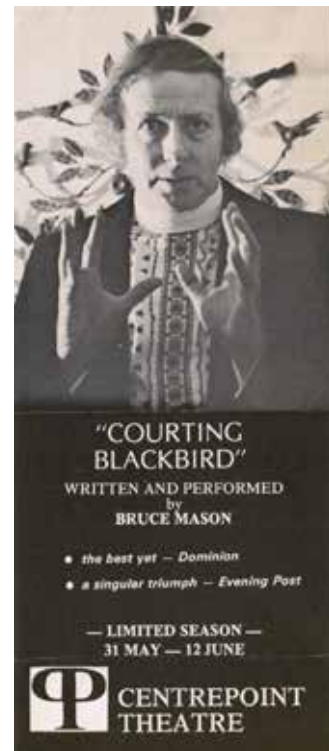
Ivan Booth; Board Accountant – perhaps the only accountant in the world describable as “wise and gentle”, says Minifie. And who could believed “art is the real thing and not just numbers”.

Technical Director: John Charlton.

Catering: Connie Thwaites and Terry Schindler.

Box Office: Pam Eastcott.

Theatre Hostesses: Jenny Vidgen and Jill Brook.



Courting Blackbird
1976

The Chairman of the Board was Mac Mitchinson JP – “a straight-talking man from the concrete industry who taught me commonsense, best practice and eventually led us into our new premises,” says Minifie.



Centrepont 1978

The Board itself was Brian Atkins, Ivan Booth, Bruce McKenzie, BM Cobbe, N. Banks, EG Elliot, JV Evans, Brian Flegg, Alan Millar, Richard W Greenhough, Margaret Greenway, Marie Law, Brenda Markham, RE Munford, AG Pierard, Phillipa Steven, Keith Towers, Frances Summerhayes and J Hugh Williams.



Twelfth Night 1978

At 2 pm on Sunday, June 18, 1978 the Minister for the Arts, Alan Highet (now best remembered as the minister of “don’t say kia ora on the phone”), opened Centrepont Theatre.



Table Manners 1979

In celebration Minifie had undertaken the production of *Twelfth Night* as the inaugural play at the new venue. (Prices – \$7.00 for dinner and show; coffee and show was \$3.00; fifty pee off for pensioners and students.) *Twelfth Night* was PN’s first Shakespeare, with some of his greatest

B-grade characters – the tall, long-socked Malvolio, Sir Toby Belch - crumbling graciously into alcoholism – (which is the only commonsense place to be in, in his and our times) - Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Feste, the best Fool (1601) until *Lear* (1605). Its central theme seems to be “love conquers lovers.” Significantly, it was to be the last Centrepont Shakespeare until Alison Quigan took ye bulle bye ye horns and produced *Romeo and Juliet* in 1994, a long, long seventeen years later.

Anyway, Minifie somehow lasted until the end of `81, then, having presided over perhaps 70 plays –including such technical monsters as *Whose Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?*, *The Glass Menagerie*, several Pinters, Chekov’s *Lady With a Lapdog*, an Ibsen or two, *Wind in the Branches of the Sassafras*, *The Importance Of...* and every other difficult play ever known to managers, he departed to find more extreme challenges, leaving the Centrepont reins in the fine deft hands of Murray Lynch.

And thus to the 80s.

The 1980s; a bit of important international background:

Emperor Hirohito dies at 87. Result of WWII is not changed,

GHW Bush becomes President and Dan Quayle is sworn in – as they would both say.

Russia leaves Afghanistan to make room for equally unsuccessful US troops. Mr O Bin Laden puts US munitions funds into Twin Tower stocks for a Cheney day..

Abattoir Khomeini puts a fatwa on Salman Rushdie. Khomeini dies.

Exxon Valdes crashes in Alaska and sues America for loss of fuel.

The world's first homosexual marriage occurs in Denmark. "I'll be buggered if I turn gay!" exclaims the Reverend Paisley.

The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to the Dalai Lama. China demands he be shot for the sake of peace. Islam condemns this call to murder – unless Salman Rushdie is shot first.

10 November, the Berlin Wall comes down and 10 million Trabants throttle through to the West, polluting more folk than were poisoned by Chernobyl.



Fallen Angels 1980

Meanwhile, back in Palmerston North... In his first newsletter, new Artistic Director Murray Lynch proclaimed: "Centrepont Theatre is now five years old. At its inception Centrepont had \$10 and a staff of three – now it has its own theatre, a staff of 22 and a membership of 1100.'

1980 brought the bedroom to the stage; *A Doll's House* (Ibsen) caused perturbation in European boudoirs, and now in those of Palmy, due to Nora's fleeing the marital sheets to "find herself". Then, in the boudoir of the year's next play, Gregor Samsa awakes to find himself in bed with a man-sized cockroach – no – he *is* the man-sized cockroach in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. And from between the sheets somewhere *Under Milkwood*, Polly Garter remembers the one she loved the best, "as we tumbled into bed was little Willy Wee who is dead dead dead". Then lesbianism in Bruce Mason's *Blood of the Lamb!* All somehow enveloped in Alan Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce*.

Most prophetic however was the last play of the year; the Littlewood Theatre's *Oh What a Lovely War* which brought us into 1981 – the year of near-civil war (and underarm bowling; we often forget it happened in the same year) - and *Foreskin's Lament*. The great New Zealand play.

There was profound prescience about the writing of *Foreskin* or maybe blinding good luck, because the play opened on 30 October 1980, a considerable time before the Tour, but it instantly became the rallying cry from the day the Springboks arrived. The play was powered by rage, disgust but deep ambivalence as well. As Greg McGee says in his book, (*Tall Tales, Some True*) the decent man in him wanted the bloody yarpies biffed out, but the rugby player in him (Junior All Black) wanted to see them thrashed. The unique, spell-binding complexity of the play is created by the fact that every single solitary bugger in it is wrong.

And late in the year Jan Prettejohns arrived, taking the place of Murray Lynch. She had been one of the pioneer directors, helming her first play *Whose Afraid of Virginia Wolf* with Margaret Blay, David McKenzie, Faye Flegg and Tony Wahren in 1975. "When I first saw it, the theatre was still in the tiny George Street premises and we were all having far too much fun. Paul Minifie was running the place - barefoot, calm and always wonderfully funny - and I was in my second year at Toi Whakaari, the New Zealand Drama School."



You're A Good Man Charlie Brown 1981

It all sound jolly and carefree - so much so that directors were friendly with critics! Most famous of them all was Bruce Mason: "He loved Centrepoin. He loved the drive from Wellington to Palmy. Hitching a lift with him you were guaranteed a couple of hours of brainy and illuminating conversation."

The steady creep into the charts of NZ plays continued; in 1975 Brian McNeill's *The Two Tigers*— the second treatment of Katherine Mansfield and by no means the last. Then in '76, four of them! *Meeting Place* by Robert Lord, *Mothers and Fathers* by Joe Mustaphia, Bruce Mason's *Not Christmas But Guy Fawkes* and *The Robbie Horror Show* by John Banas.



***Glide Time* 1977**

It was the largest number the theatre was to reach for some years, but 1977 and '78 produced quality in lieu of quantity – both *Glide Time* and *Middle Age Spread* made their first appearances.

"Jump to 1981" says Ms Prettejohns. "Murray Lynch has replaced Paul as Artistic Director and I have left Downstage to become Centrepoin's Associate Director. This was the year of the Springbok tour. On a bitterly cold day in July, rehearsals stopped as we all (or most of us) trooped out to join the Manawatu march in protest at the tour. At the end of that year, Murray left and I became director of the theatre, with the support of Alyson Baker as Associate." And now, alas, the beginning of the end of the golden weather: "In early 1982, the Arts Council (now Creative NZ) saw fit, in their wisdom, to pull the plug on the theatre's funding". (Theatre supporters were told by the Council that this was the end.

They were sure Centrepoint would die. The theatre was meant to expire in order to fund “main centre theatres”).

“To the rescue, came the company: actors, technical and backstage staff, designers, front of house - for whom ‘just give up and go quietly’ was never an option. The city’s theatregoers, too, were justly proud of their theatre.” And it bloody well refused to die. Big name actors such as Ray Henwood performed, and big-name directors Simon Phillips, Richard Mudford, George Webby and David Copeland came up from Wellington and worked for peanuts to keep the place going. The Downstage cast of *Hamlet* (they deserve an honourable mention: Bruce Phillips Hamlet, Alice Fraser Gertrude, Paul Gittens Claudius, Janet Fisher Ophelia, Michal McGrath Laertes, John Callen Polonius and Lloyd Scott as Horatio plus grave diggers et al, forewent their night off and raised \$1600 in a charity concert for Centrepoint. Bravo! The suited flunkies of theatredom were learning there was more to the stage than sponsors’ night. And Manawatu people came! It was the stuff of warming drama to see big farmers goofily entering the foyer, led by wives holding the rings in their noses.



We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay 1982

Prettejohns: “Somehow or other, by dint of a crowd-pleasing programme of plays, much gallows humour and astonishing acts of generosity, we all muddled through the year. At times it felt like clinging to the wreckage. Dario Fo’s very funny *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* got laughs and a big audience. Fo’s *We Can’t Pay? We Won’t Pay!* was cheerfully adapted to reflect our attitude to the Arts Council’s bean counters.

“And then it was over,” continues Prettejohns; “**Christmas 1982**. The theatre had survived - just. I had a job to go to at Mercury Theatre and the acting company was ready to leave, too. We all flew away to various corners of the country to catch our breath and get some sleep.”

Theatre reviewer John Ross (who is really a lovely man despite his extravagant conservatism) nut shelled the situation in a letter to the *Evening Standard's* Editor to express his rage “that QEII had chopped off Centrepoint’s grant in order that other Community Theatres can survive.” Nice one, Arts Council, you really got that theatre flying - to various corners of the country.

For months there was no money to support a new Artistic Director and the job was taken over by administrator Jill Wheeler who maintained the nest from which its talented inhabitants had fled.

Phil Monk, who was on the theatre trust board for 17 years (beginning with the theatre’s third play, *Wind in the Branches of the Sassafras* with Paul Minifie and Marty van Hale,) says: “As Chairman I was determined to keep the theatre going because I felt it offered a career path to young performers, set builders, designers and directors.” And it has! Monk is on record as saying the two plays directed by the (incredibly young) Simon Phillips in 1983 – *Tom Foolery* and *Cloud Nine* - ensured the survival of the tenuously established little theatre.



Cloud Nine 1983

And the loyal public attended these plays – “put it on and they will come”. The Council was either impressed or intimidated; it agreed that if the theatre could support itself for a year the financial tap would be turned back on.

Initial auspices were encouraging - on 10 June 1985 Trust Chairman Monk resigned, explaining that “as the theatre was now doing so well”, he could tend to his own expanding business. (Mac Mitchison was elected unopposed; Ivan Booth became deputy.)

However Murray Lynch presided over the renaissance of fortunes for less than a year. Keeping theatres afloat can be exhausting and he vacated the bridge.

A short note on Dario Fo: The man who had inspired Don Hampton’s vision of the Centrepoint triple-theatre and had unwittingly coined the revolutionary anti-Council slogan “Can’t pay won’t pay” had received the Nobel Prize 1997: “Dario Fo emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the down-trodden.” Fo, some years before, had decided his plays were too popular (sheesh, what a problem!) He felt his works were being seen as comedy rather than justifiably vicious attacks on corrupt capitalism. He began performing in factories and shipyards – but to his horror his adoring theatrical audience followed him into the oily precincts! Being one of the few playwrights to win the Nobel Prize didn’t help – and ironically he was defeated by the enemy. He fell into the Big Business trap pointed out by famous critic Kenneth Tynan – “If you want to get rid of a pesky socialist, give him a knighthood.” (Or a Nobel). For rather more mundane reasons, Don Hampton’s plan to take theatre to the workshop didn’t work either. (Mind you, the new Centrepoint was to be in a disused factory, so that’s something.)

And so to *Foreskin*: “Stinky, smelly, slimy, ugly, loudmouthed characters who belched spat, sang and involved their audience in all their evil rotten schemes...” Oh, sorry, that was actually critic Lin Ferguson reviewing the kid’s show *Treasure Island*. Same thing though. Come to think of it there is nothing to be said about *Foreskin* that hasn’t been said before - except, perhaps, size doesn’t matter on the stage.

1982; There was angst indoors when a re-run of Ibsen’s *Hedder Gabler*, was staged, gloriously reflecting marital confusion – was she a heroine fighting society or an evil villain? She points a gun at hubby George Tesler then at herself. The plot thickens - and thins in equal measure.

There is no such equivocation with *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* – knickers to subtlety. Dario Fo tells us baldly how South African police biffed a black gentleman out of their office window.

1983. The year featured a play in which every character was a dropped name. Joseph McCarthy calls at Einstein's hotel and demands he appear at the UnAmerican Activities hearing. Einstein tells him to feck off – in German. McCarthy says he will return in the morning. Marilyn Monroe arrives and gives Einstein a lecture on his theory of Relativity. They decide to go to bed together but are interrupted pre-coitus interuptus by her husband Joe Dimaggio. Later Einstein is sitting on his bed with his watch stopped at 8:15 am – the time at which Hiroshima was obliterated. McCarthy returns to find Einstein gone and MM lying naked in Albert's bed. - And this play - by Terry Johnson - was called *Insignificance!*

This was also the year of *Objection Overruled* by Carolyn Burns who sat beside me in the TV2 Newsroom in Christchurch in earlier years (when there were only TV's One and 2) while I was furtively writing *Alf's General Theory* and would ask me questions such as – “if X said this to you, what would you say?” My usual dismissive response was “shut up and leave the writing to the writers”. The result was *Objection Overruled*, one of the smash comedies of the decade, whereas *Alf* seeped to a quiet and insignificant death.

The glamorous Stuart Devenie presided over the theatre in this year of '83. Devenie had been asked to take over in order to recoup Centrepont Theatre's \$40,000 deficit and affable and sweet natured though he is, he was prepared to go to extreme lengths, as Carmel McGlone will attest. “I was on the stage every night in *Hayfever* by Coward, and rehearsing *Agnes of God* during the day - then cleaning the tables and toilets after the show! Then getting up next day to do it all again – with the addition of lunchtime readings. This was Stuart 'saving money'; it was his tactic to keep things afloat.” But Carmel is a very forgiving person: “It was a feisty old time when I was there. I did about two years. I consider it my acting training. Certainly it's where I got my flying hours!” She had started at Centrepont with Simon Philips and ended with Stuart Devenie and she has a special memory “the gala opening of *Bullshot Crummond* is etched into my brain”. (And more of that later.)

Devenie's first programmed play had been a Roger Hall – *Hot Water*, which did Roger's usual 94 percent. But to Devenie's puzzlement the debt remained undiminished. He asked the Board Chairman if he could see the books and was told they were none of his business. Doughty Devenie returned late at night, broke into the office, opened the books and found to his horror the deficit was actually \$100,000! Box office profits were being eaten up by the losses of the restaurant. Oddly enough it didn't occur to anyone, until the arrival of Alison Quigan, to shut the restaurant down.



Sleuth 1984

1984; *Coaltown Blues* – bluer than even writer Mervyn ‘Proc’ Thompson had envisaged. Thompson could make you laugh in his plays, but didn’t often make you happy. So the answer to a quizzical query by a critic: “was the play fictional or autobiographical?” is fairly self evident; the latter. Down Proc’s way – Reefton – “Gateway to the Coast” - where electricity started in New Zealand (and stops with regularity) - life was not a load of laffs. No work, nothing to do, feckless fathers, fearful mothers, an average of eleven siblings – dreadful, but resulting in a wonderland of literary potential – the profoundly Irish *Angela’s Ashes* could easily have been written on the Coast and no New Zealander has won a Booker Prize not set there. Tension was always rife - miners were all socialist, farmers all National – elections were to the death. And there was also the



Domestic Tragedy 1984

religious division between Catholic and Proddy-hoppers too; rugby matches between Marist and Reefton were played in the spirit of the Shankly Rd. From this, Thompson developed a need to write and ran away to educate himself and set about improving conditions for the worker, taking with him the WC habit of unhappiness. He wrote, he lectured in universities, he directed plays, performed in his own single-handers. He was man on his way up the ladder. Then he was abducted by a bunch of female boilermakers who abused and castigated him and tied him to a tree. He hid out in many towns where he was performing and his show was usually accompanied by oaths and threats from the vigilantes outside. I was at his dying; he awoke regularly thinking he was in hell. He bequeathed his girlfriend to me (who fled next day). Farewell bro – may you have got that half hour’s start on the devil before you died. Proc had a reasonably tranquil season in Palmy in the year of Big Brother.

Now back to the *Bullshot Crummond* that haunted the nightmares of Carmel McGlone. It was a lumbering parody of the *Bulldog Drummond* type, reliant on absurd coincidence, failure and unlikely occasion, with a set so huge the theatre diners had to eat in the cavernous and cold rehearsal room. Let present Artistic Director and actor Jeff Kingsford-Brown take up the story: “For a start, it was a feverishly complicated play. Opening night, it was a disaster. We weren’t ready – we were still rehearsing on opening night as the audience began arriving for dinner. We were badly under-rehearsed. It was pandemonium. The wrong sets came on in the wrong scenes – a fireplace on one side of the stage, a forest on the other. The cast lost the plot several times – at one point the stage manager was frantically trying to signal me, holding up a sign: *WHERE ARE WE?*”

It was the most demoralising experience I've ever had. The show closed after opening night, we went into intensive rehearsals for another three days then opened again."

What a scene to have seen! Carmel shattered, Jeff Kingsford Brown demoralised – and fellow thespian Jon Brazier, trying to kick down the dressing room door.

Extraordinarily, the season was a semi-success.

The year pulled its socks up with Ibsen's *Ghosts* in which Helen Alving dedicates an orphanage in memory of her dead husband – but really to ensure her son Oswald will inherit nothing. She has stumbled onto hubby's philanders with Regina the maid, with whom Oswald is in love but who turns out to be his half-sister. Oh, and he's inherited syphilis. Soap opera doesn't hold a fig against good Norwegian drama!

1985: The Year of the Woman – who wrote six of the nine plays of this year.

Skirmishess by Catherine Hayes. Two women sit at the bedside of their mother who is incontinent and paralytic. One daughter had stayed home to nurse mum, the other had high-hoofed it to New York. Overall it's a tense little bedroom scene – yet it is categorised as a comedy! Hilary Cleary's role as the decaying mother was evidently very onerous, demanding great control over her few words and almost perfect stillness – even though she was troubled by flies: "Ye gods, those bed stains must have been real!" says Jean (Jane Waddell), the daughter who stayed home and is sarcastic, bored and resentful of her sister's inability to see the unfairness of the situation. They reveal themselves as bleakly unloved, unloving souls. But they were family, which will have to do as a happy ending.

In March the wondrous Cathy Downes gave proof of the magic of the stage. Coming into the foyer after a performance of *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* a woman was heard remarking to her friend "But she looked so much taller on the stage!" She was, dear lady, she was.

Outside In, involves seven women locked in gaol and locked also, in a mindless hierarchy of power. Nobody pecks Boss (Dulcie Smart) or her lover lieutenant Ginny (Louise Dunne); everyone pecks Lou (Andrea Kelland) who talks to Jesus and pinches chocolate. Merial Buchanan is a gnarled old lifer who even Boss doesn't peck too hard and who keeps a tacit eye on Lou. Carmel McGlone and Viv Bell represent the working (girl) class with intense ferocity. It is brutal, but, outside and in, that's how life is. Until educated middle-class junkie Helen played by Joanna Bryant, arrives and almost unwittingly undermines the system. It could easily be an episode of *Prisoner* but its emphasis is different – as writer Hillary Beaton said, she wrote it as a love story, putting it several storeys of penitentiary cellblocks higher than the TV series.

The play did moderate business – over 50 percent. The new, Labour, Minister of Corrections attended as did the manager of Arohata Women's Prison. "It was a day that illustrated to me," said the director, "the potential of what a professional community theatre can offer. It was a risk that paid off and encouraged me to take other risks at Centrepont." It

was Bill Walker, newly appointed Artistic Director speaking, and for better or worse, he took the risks. And thus began the Job Trials of Bill.

We're in the year of the theatre of unease. Conflagration had arched across the prosceniums of the nation - this was the year of the Revolution. Perhaps it was the influence of Dario Fo and *Can't Pay, Won't Pay* from '82, and the fist-waving mettle of *Coaltown Blues*. Whatever, the battles with management of '85 were going to be fought much more abrasively than ever before. A new resolve was afoot, created by the glacial squeeze of Rogernomics. Back to the barricades of '81 was the cry - "Strike!" And they did. On 30/3/85 the Court Theatre performance of *Hobson's Choice* was cancelled because of a down-tool by actors and production staff. In Auckland, Mercury Theatre went on strike for one day in protest at the breakdown of the national award talks. Unprecedented! Staff at other theatres were also meeting to discuss *Les Miserables*-type action. In April Court Theatre actors were being allowed to address the audience at the end of each performance on how low their wages were.

The battle took its toll: on 14/3/85, Stuart Devenie retired after 15 months as Artistic Director of Centrepont Theatre. He had found those months exhausting. He was not the only one to feel the strain. Several of the longer-serving staff at Centrepont resigned before Christmas. The reasons? "The demands of working in a theatre in crisis," maintained Devenie. He was quick to point out that in spite of the series of crises that had dogged Centrepont, the audience support had always been strong. "We had to compromise a little with our programme. We made a set for *Hot Water* soon after I arrived and we recycled that set for shows until it could be recycled no more."

So, enter into the quiet theatrical pastures of the Manawatu ex-butcher's apprentice William Walker whose CV included 'badminton, bowls, camera operating, card dealing, cricket, directing, fencing, video editing, golf, HT licence, horse riding, martial arts, motorbikes, snooker and tennis'. He further described himself to the Chairhuman of the Centrepont Trust Board, that he was a male feminist, a Catholic rebel who wore his heart on his sleeve, was deeply involved in the anti-nuclear movement and secretary of the Wellington branch of Equity campaigning to raise actor's wages by 25 percent. These matters he revealed in audition for Artistic Director and astonishingly, got the job! So let the games begin! Conservative Board vs Walker - who was a tough wee cookie (he played Hitler at Bats) but enormously talented and wrote a splendid play called *Take Me Home, Mr*, that won Chapman Tripp prizes - as had he, for his participation in other plays.

Agitation began immediately - he scheduled *Steaming* - in which four of the six females in the cast take off all their clothes! The women nakedly steam in their communal baths which are threatened with closure by the Thatcher government; it is quickly apparent that the play's theme is not Beauty but Truth. It was scheduled for an unprecedentedly long season of eight weeks, but the FULL TONIGHT sign was outside more often than not - oh how many opponents of the new 'market-economics-cum-dribble-down theory' there are in the conservative Manawatu!



Steaming 1985

When the Wind Blows, adapted from the glumly brilliant cartoon stories of Raymond Briggs, reveals Walker's anti-nuclear sympathies. The theatre was declared a Nuclear Free Zone and a flag, draped over its roof, featured on the front page of the *Manawatu Evening Standard*. Watching the small, bumbling efforts of humble people to save themselves from nuclear obliteration is terrible and funny, rather like watching someone trying to blow out the fuse of an H-bomb. Hilda Bloggs (Shirley Kelly) keeps the house clean, Jim Bloggs (David McKenzie) practises jumping off the sofa in a parachute. You may consider their efforts either forlorn or ridiculous – but what would you do?

Thus to *Out in the Cold*. This semi-comedy is about a woman disguising herself as John 'the Stump' to get a big-paying job on the chain. Joanna Bryant plays Stump; Walker, seemingly undistracted by contractual matters, brilliantly plays Strawberry. David McKenzie who had performed on the Centrepoint stage since there was one, plays Porridge – the consummate cereal actor. It was written, confesses the author, Greg McGee, in one month. William Walker, participating Artistic Director, confessed that it should not have been staged at all. "My rationale for programming it was twofold; it had been a huge hit in Wellington when Colin McColl did it at Depot Theatre and it was set in a freezing works. I figured it would appeal to the many local Manawatu freezing workers." But, "it failed at Centrepoint for two different reasons...At an hour it was too short for a main bill and he had filled the first half hour with a country duet. This "only left the audience a bit bewildered." And the second reason left he himself a bit bewildered – "all the f**ks were too much for the locals. I was told this directly by a freezing worker after the show. "But," I retorted defensively, "you must say it all the time at work." "Course I do," he said, "but I don't want the wife to hear it when I take her out to be f**ken entertained!" The Chairman of the Board declared it the worst play we had ever put

on. With two low performing plays, I was beginning to feel the heat. The wisdom of my programming was already being questioned by an increasingly hostile Board, one of whom declared the government shouldn't be 'giving away tax-payers' money to theatres anyway.' Fortunately *Gulls* held its own."

It's a lovely play about a boy who can't speak – except to gulls with whom he forms a strong relationship. The boy was played by Bill Clements, the gulls by gloriously devised puppets that swooped, landed at Bill's feet, flew expertly away after homo-avian chats. Then the disaster that seemed to dog Walker during his Centrepont years struck again. The harmonica player who accompanied the gulls was ill, Walker had to deputise. The theatre was booked for a contingent of firemen's wives. They arrived – let's say – merrily, led by a woman in knickers and bra. Walker found her spread out on the stage, a few minutes before curtain-rise, being stethoscopically examined by a woman in short white coat and fishnets. The odds on debacle quadrupled. Walker's harmonica technique (an instrument he had never played before) was to move his lips right when he wanted high notes, left when lowness was desired. The raucous fire-wives were transfixed; the harmonica work adjudged best ever. The performance was a rare success for the besieged Artistic Director.

Trouble still loomed at mill on several fronts. There was the behind-the-scenes stoushes between management and Walker over his contract. Meanwhile the editorial of a local newspaper expressed hope that the up-coming McGee would cheer up the parish "after the mixed feelings inspired by the recent offerings. 'We agree that theatre should grapple with the problems of the real world but must it be so thoroughly gloomy?'" *Out in the Cold* was to have been the cure and fortunately the first night consensus was that it was mirthful – if only just: "We're pleased to say that the political and sociological messages didn't detract from the show's humour" said *The Guardian* with more relief than enthusiasm.

The end of the year play was to be *Trafford Tanzi*, described by the Chairman of the Board as: 'this weird wrestling feminist thing.' It is indeed about the struggle between genders, represented by wrestling – of such vigour that at one time two of the actors wore neck braces. And "the lead roles were double-cast so the actors could recover over 48 hours after each performance. To my (Walker's) relief Palmerston North lapped it up. The house was full every night and everybody got into the spirit of the show. It was dangerous, exhilarating and heaps of fun. So Centrepont ended 1985 as it had begun; with a smash hit on its hands. The coffers were full and we had a company of happy actors and production workers. I wish the joy had been shared by the Trust Board..."

They were not. And worse was to come - the rights to *Educating Rita* – then barnstorming the theatrical world – were thought to have been secured; the work was already in production. Suddenly a London-based blowfish called Derek Glynn demanded that Centrepont pay \$300 a performance for the lovingly anticipated work. Mr Glynn, it seems, owned the Australasian rights. The Board didn't have the money to go ahead – although they would have got their money back instantly – and veered off. Instead, they

bought the rights to Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* which was to star Joanna Bryant and John McDavitt. The play – which works in reverse – is evidently based on Pinter's own affair with a news presenter, betraying Antonia Fraser his wife, in real life a writer of damn good history. Heroine Emma has an ardent affair with Jerry (married to Judith), best friend of hubby Robert. Five years in, Emma tells hubby – without telling her lover Jerry she has done so – all about it. Then carries on with the affair – without telling Robert she is doing so). Eventually the marriage fails but the affair – or whatever you call such a non-situation – continues, leading to even more reverse complexity. Overall, a mystery transparent enough to be called 'Pinteresque'.

It was a damn good play and a damn good production - "and managed to get near its box office targets. Unfortunately the change of programme caused disquiet in the theatre and the title was an omen for what would occur in the next production."

It was New York gay writer Harvey Feinstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*. Walker's intent was to win sympathy for the gay community, recently liberated by the Homosexual Law Reform Act. Needless to say the Trust Board were appalled by the production. Also needless to say the public flocked to this farcical situation comedy built around a love-story which everyone could be drawn into. They cried with laughter and "left the theatre with a hugely positive shared experience which surely had to soften any opposition...to the idea that gay men and women should be allowed to love each other without fear of the law making them criminals."

No; the Board hated it and one of the lead actors walked out. The ructions that followed meant his mind wasn't quite on the job as preparations for *Footrot Flats* ensued. No singing/ acting Wal could be found and rehearsals were reduced from four weeks to three as he was sought. The Trusts' trust was not reinforced. The show however, after a shaky start "turned out to be a cracker. Big, blokey and blessed with great singing and acting skills. Geoffrey Dolan was as good as imagined, Vivienne Bell was born to play Cheeky Hobson and Jeff Kingsford Brown's *Dog* was a tour de force. His singing in particular was a rare theatrical feat."

Then *Foreskin's Lament*, Duncan Smith's directing debut at Centrepoint. Jeff Dolan transformed from love-smitten Wal to hate-filled Clean; Bill Kircher was Foreskin. The second play in a row had a highly successful season of six weeks.

Had the worm of disaster turned? No, the late night theatre Walker had devised to catch a new and younger audience ("Punks in the theatre after midnight?" exclaimed the Chairman) was shut down when a youth was found smoking pot in the toilet.



Foreskin's Lament Programme 1986

The last straw was Walker's announced intention to stage *Bouncers*. At the next Trust Board meeting the Chairman read the only two unfavourable reviews of the play in its English seasons. (For example: "The first night of the first production in Hull, 1977, had been inauspicious – there was an audience of two. For example: 'The two were a critic and a drunk. The drunk started arguing with the cast and wanted to have a go; the critic left"). Then he announced "If this show goes ahead, I am resigning." The play was already in production, it had to go ahead. The bouncers - Bill Kircher, Peter McCallum, Mark Wright and Duncan Smith arrived on opening night in a helicopter and thus began a record-smashing legend. But Bill Walker was fired, the Chairman's resignation was denied. And as he walked, Walker could reflect that during his tenure "the standard of production was always high. We restored the theatre to sound financial health whilst being the first theatre to raise wages by 25 percent." In terms of the introduction of fresh, challenging and lucrative works Walker remains one of the top Artistic Directors in Centrepoint history. "Thanks Centrepoint," he concludes, "happy birthday."



***Bouncers* 1986**

By the way - Centrepoint still wants its painting back! It was in the lobby during *Footrot Flats* and was a print of *Landscape with Church* by Eric Lee Johnson, borrowed from the Palmerston North Public Library. With the print valued at \$40 this was not a theft that competed with a loss of the Mona Lisa. "But we want it back", said stage manager Eric DeBeus: "I can understand someone taking it, it's really quite neat, but we'd like it back on a no questions asked basis." In the near 30 years since, it has never been returned.

1987 – the year of Alison Quigan and the year the country’s money went away: the Crashes of `87. Yuppies stopped throwing crayfish round restaurants and quietly decamped to Australia whose economy they had not wrecked and helped Ozzie Yuppies do the job.

A play of that year reflected, without our noticing, the bizarre and terrible social circumstances; *Equus* is about a boy who pokes the eyes out of a horse. Sheesh! Among the many remarks it provoked from wise theatrical critics were “controversial”, “daring” and “challenging” but very rarely “crystal clear” or “comprehensible” because few of us could make head nor tail of the play or the horse but never admitted it. In hindsight we realised Peter Shaffer was telling us that something was rotten in the state of Denmark – and the rest of the world – although no one at the time could understand why. Then Roger Hall showed us, per medium of *The Share Club*.

Breaking the Silence: A train chuffs through Lenin’s Russia. On board an aristocratic family dispossessed by the Revolution. The train, after the loss of their palaces and estates, is their only home. Ye gods here we go again – effects of a commercial crash. Husband Nikolai (Geoffrey Heath) retains his well-born attitudes despite their obvious failure. His wife Eugenia (Jennifer Ward-Lealand) has found that the change in their circumstances opens new ways of life. Their son Sasha is no longer a small turd-producing machine in the nursery, but a thing with life. And the maid, ye gods, has a personality and ideas. Eugenia grows into a new relationship with them both. Meanwhile Nikolai is working on the invention of talking movies. He succeeds but at the very moment that he could prove it, the machine is smashed. The same brainless iconoclasm that stuffed the world in `87 had done so back in 1917. It’s the future repeating itself. Director Alison Quigan advised the audience to bring a hanky. It was needed, it was beautiful.

So was Eugenia, played by Jennifer Ward-Lealand who appeared in three other Centrepoint plays that year, (*Side by Side by Sondheim*, *The Real Thing* – Stoppard, and *Strip* by Lorae Parry). The award-winning Jennifer rated her time with Centrepoint with Alison as valuable at an important point in her career: “The five months I spent at Centrepoint were a very special time for me. As a young actress I got the opportunity to play some important roles, ply my craft, and follow through on the training I had received at Theatre Corporate over the previous five years. And what a treat it was to work with Alison Quigan and develop what continues to be a terrific working relationship. Although I was away from Auckland and my not-quite-then husband for a long time, working at Centrepoint was definitely the right thing to be doing and I remember it very fondly. “

For *Breaking the Silence* Jennifer Ward-Lealand won the Manawatu *Evening Standard* Best Actress Award – probably beating herself into second, third and fourth. Born in Wellington, she first hit the boards at age seven. Since then she has won a bucket load of honours – Officer of NZ Order of Merit 2007, Best Actress at the International Festival of Fantasy Film in Sitges, Catalonia; GOFTA for *Danny and Raewyn*. She was acting coach for Melanie Lynskey in *Heavenly Creatures*; she toured with *Front Lawn* (Don McLashan and Harry Sinclair) to Philadelphia, Minneapolis, New York, London and Edinburgh (Pick of the Fringe). But she is by no means a Grand Dame; in the last few years she has voiced the role of Dorable Duck in the children’s television show *Buzzy Bee and Friends*.

1988. The year began with a return of *The Share Club* and ended with *After the Crash* by Roger Hall – with Roger in the first night crowd. It's a daunting experience when Roger comes to view his own plays; he sits erect, slightly to the downstage-right and as steely-eyed as Sam the Eagle from the Muppets as he watches you mincing his words. But it was a big year for him – he could afford the ticket - he was probably one of the first to financially recover from the Crash; a time, he said, when “the whole world went mad”.

Then, the latest from the John Godber (he of *Bouncers* and *Teechers* etc – 50 plays all up). Let John Dawick be our leader in the review of this latest work, *Up 'N Under*. Dr John Dawick, by the way, was a lecturer in English at Massey who often appeared in university plays. He had a rheumatic limp which inspired one unwitting critic to comment; “Dawick, as Richard III, over-exaggerated the famous Crookback limp,” little realising he couldn't move without it. Anyway, here he is on John Godber's irreverent take on rugby:

*O for a Muse of fire that might convey
Some semblance of this Godber play!
Within but two hours' traffic of the stage
Two mighty forces locked in conflict wage
War in seven league boots and do
Yet more stirring deeds than Rocky II
And though but six, the cast perform such stunts
As taking high upreared and abutting punts
On Centrepoin't's green narrow scaffold frame
Whilst in our minds they re-create the game.*

Then two all-time biggies, *Shirley Valentine* and *Ladies Night*. There was a curious connection between them. Here's Lucy Schmidt: “The first professional show I saw was at Centrepoin't Theatre. It was *Shirley Valentine* starring the one and only Alison Quigan. (And one and only she was in this one-hander.) I was there the night the gas didn't go on to cook the chips and Alison had to exit and get the stage manager to come on and be the 'gas man' to get it going. She didn't drop out of character for a second!”

Now, from *Ladies Night II* here's David Geary: “On the first night of *Ladies Night* the power went out and so dinner couldn't be cooked in time. The show had to be delayed and the audience were



***Shirley Valentine* 1988**

offered half-price drinks. Talk about Lotto, everyone got blotto. By the time dinner was finally over the waiting backstage actors heard loud drumming on tables and chants BOOM BOOM BOOM GEARS OFF! The cast came out but the audience was only interested in strip routines and rather in fear of their lives, the fearless bouncers gave them nothing else. The audience lapped it up but shouted MORE, MORE, MORE!"



Ladies Night 1989

So, two hit plays, Shirley V and Ladies Night conjoined by cooking.

1989:

Burn This, by Lanford Wilson, was a scorching beginning to the year, providing all the elements from Anguish to Zest and the best silences since Pinter. It's one of those NY apartment works based on snazzy speech work, homosexuality (and surprisingly no Jewishness), with a funeral to hot up and hot down proceedings. All the emotions are touched on by Alison Quigan, David Geary and David Pringle – and then along came Pale (David Cameron). Not everyone was enrapt however. David Geary, playing Larry, tells this story about his first Centrepoint play: "Larry asks his roommate, played by Alison Quigan, what take-out food she wants and some card in the audience starts yelling: 'Mate, I'll have a burger, chips, pineapple ring and spring roll!' That's when I realised if you weren't completely compelling on stage, some of the audience would try to become the entertainment."

My Son the Lawyer is Drowning. Alan and Miriam Isaacs, (Ross Gumbley and Amanda Tollemarche), residents of a pleasant area of Melbourne, are having problems with their problem son Danny, (David Geary). The problem is of the standard gender variety. It is resolved, spectacularly. Also they are having neighbour troubles. And Rikta, Alan's live-in mother-in-law, who has a hair-style reminiscent of a huge toffee apple, is not providing suburban tranquillity either. So life could be really really better. Then a hundred tonnes of wood plummets from heaven into their garden and God (Geoffrey Wearing) contacts Alan per medium of television (today it would be iPad) and says, "Alan, build me an Ark". He has had enough of the human race; he's going to replace it with iguanodons. Rachel Nash, playing a dinosaur, was described by John Ross as "having a gorgeous tail".

Hens' Teeth came to town in March, featuring Prue Langbein's "cooking with condoms". Carmel McGlone and Lorae Parry introduced the imperishable Digger and Nudger and Marg Layton sang "You can have my husband but don't touch my man." (Marg will not appreciate the following information titbit because she made her name as a gutsy graunchy tough, snarling Blues singer but the fact is she has a voice as sweet as Demerara sugar.)



***Private Lives* 1989**

Then in April came Noel Coward, stalking out of the kaypocky clouds of yesteryear with the yellowed text of *Private Lives* under his immaculately manicured arm. This edition starred Ross Gumbley, Rachel Nash, Geoffrey Heath and Amanda Tollmarch; set by Ian Burtcher, lighting by Martin Yates. “It should draw crowds,” said the critics, “thrilling, sharp and witty.” Based on a lovely idea, ardent ex -couple Elyot and Amanda re-meet on honeymoons with new spouses and re-fall in love. Brilliant! “He (Coward) has really defined the way in which we view the 1920s and 30s,” enthused director Quigan. “Some critics considered it vulgar and said if these are private lives they should remain private,” she added. Those critics were, of course, also defining 1920s attitudes.

But there was a dark side to Noel Coward. Many knew of it, but Margaret Thatcher was the first to publically allude to it when she outed Coward in the House of Commons 1987, by saying (three years before his knighthood) that Coward was susceptible to blackmail “because of his sexual tastes”. What neither she, nor Buckingham Palace, ever added was that he had had an erumpent, 20 year affair with the Duke of Kent, younger brother of both the abdicator Edward and George the stuttering star of *The King’s Speech*. Saddest fact of all in this saga is that he was vastly more talented, interesting and intelligent than either of his brothers but was kept from public life by the probings of Lord Beaverbrook which had revealed letters from the Duke addressed to “My dearest darling Noel” and “Noelle, my own sweet love”. The Duke died in a mysterious light plane crash in Scotland August 23 1942.

Coward was not a gut-bustingly humorous writer – more an amusing one – but he once said a very funny thing. As he passed a billboard for a new movie starring Michael

Redgrave and Dirk Bogard entitled *The Sea Shall Not Have Them!* he was heard to murmur: "Why not? Everyone else has."

He was knighted by the Queen, niece of the Duke of Kent, in 1970.

And now, breaking news from the kitchen: In August 1989, Gordon Edwards stands down after cooking for Centrepont almost since its inception. New chip-fryers were Brian Harvey from Aro St Cafe (such steamed mussels) and Philip Tasker-Poland from London's plush Food for Thought.

Their first meal was prepared for the packed audiences of yet another bout of *Ladies Night*. The soup was Caribbean, the omelette from Iran, the main chicken dish was Italian and the dessert from Wellington. This '89 version of *Ladies Night* was to be followed by seasons in '91 and '93 - culinary inventiveness must have been severely stretched by this play alone. Critical opinion was similarly stretched - reviewer Zoe Tilah avers it was "brilliantly acted, very funny and definitely not a strip show". Really? So what were Ross Gumbley, Jeff Kingsford-Brown, Tak Daniels and David Geary taking off?

Then back to the West End. May 10, 1989. English playwright Christopher Hampton once read an untranslated, 200 year old French novel by the well-known novelist Choderlos de Laclos. Why? Well he was a translator as well. The result was a play called *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* which deals with the very finest aspects of violent, unprincipled sex. If Jane Austen wrote of marriage as a reward, de Laclos concentrated on the rewards gained pre-martially. It was a dazzling depiction of the games of passion and perversion that people were playing under the shadow of the guillotine. As we still do today.

Reviewer Lin Ferguson pronounced *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (at three hours) a "lengthy night out" (*Standard* 22/5/89). Knickers, the audience had a ball listening to Alison Quigan (Marquise de Merteuil) swapping upper-class porno- chat with the Vicomte de Valmont (Nathaniel Lees). From it emerged a wager - the Marquise would bet her body that the Valmont could not seduce the beautiful ingénue Madame de Tourvel (Fiona Samuel). He does, at the cost of his dashing cynicism; he falls in love. The guillotine falls.

PS: Millie Kerfoot in the role of Madam Rosamunde had to have her costume extended to cover the vast plaster encasement she required after an industrial fall. "Wardrobe were very clever and have added frills to the coat I'm wearing," she said.

And here's a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the lives of those actors who inhabited the world of the dangerous liaisons. Glenys Levestam who co-starred in the very successful '89 Centrepont production of *Steel Magnolias*, remembered that when her husband Kevin Woodill came off-stage for the night he hung up his fine frock coats and breeches and set off for his lodgings - in the jockeys' quarters at the Awapuni racing stables!

Steel Magnolias itself was based in a Louisiana version of Audrey's beauty salon called Truvy's Beauty Parlour - and knocks us down with feathers as we learn the lives and loves of the hair-dried of Chiquapi Parish. As its target was the middle-aged rather than the young it could be defined as Ma-dra rather than Chick-lit.

Cover Boy, by Rod Dunbar 16/6/89. Felix - played with that mischievous gusto Jeff KB commands so well - is a nerd. He is a Scrabble player who, for whatever reason has a Road-to-Damascus moment. He grabs his girlfriend and heads for the fleshpots where he meets Mike, hot, hot Mike – who lends him a copy of the magazine HOT. Felix is entranced! He will become a yuppie, he will buy shades, and he will associate with the girls on the glossy pages and absorb their sophistication. He will become coverboy of HOT! Mike, almost inevitably, is portrayed by Ross Gumbley. As are all other males in the play. The women – Felix’s mum, the brassy editor of HOT, etc. – are all an exuberant Emma Kinane.

Conjugal Rights – first produced in Feb of 1990, was reprised the following year, such is the nation-wide love of Roger Hall. Director Alison Q said *Conjugal Rights* was the best Hall since *Middle Aged Spread*. “It is so well structured with his brilliant sense of humour and style yet deals with a subject that is becoming more common, as couples approaching their middle forties find their respective careers are forcing them to live separate lives.” And every middle-aged spectator squirmed in their chair, just a little.



Conjugal Rites 1990

The 90s

Smoking is banned on planes ensuring recycled replaces fresh air, ensuring planes reek of overfull toilets and silent farts.

Roseanne Barr sings the US nation anthem extremely badly, showing the world how really really bad it is.

The Soviet Union ends with a whimper, not a bang.

Rodney King is kicked and hit by four cops but humanity prevails and he is found guilty of denting police property (steel caps on boots) and not resisting arrest.

An insane stand-off calls itself Waco.

OJ Simpson vows to find the murderer of his wife. So determined is he to do, so innocent is he found by the jury, that his dead wife is dug up and charged with being dead for no good reason.

Nancy Kerrigan is clubbed on the knee; Tonya Harding does not get a medal at the winter Olympics.

Dolly the sheep is born at the age of 11. Lady Di dies.

Harry Potter is invented. So is Viagra. Humans between 9 and 89 are excited by one or the other.

Conjugal Rights: Roger Hall, Feb 16 to 17 Mar: Genevieve and Barry are a married couple in their 40s. Barry has climbed into bed with Gen to celebrate 21 yrs of splendid marriage. He is a dentist. Dentists make money and rule the roost at work, where they have an assistant, and at home, where they have a slave. But there is a fly in the ointment: Gen insisted on going to university when the kids had grown up, and now she'd taken her bar exams and is in practice. Like him! Dentists and lawyers both practice – they are no longer assistants. The couple stay in bed for 20 years, discussing their life. The conjugal right is the divine Alice Fraser, conjugal left is the stately Geoffrey Heath.

Second up was *Sex Fiend*, 24 Mar to 28 April, filled with the ruggedly elegant words of Danny Mulheron and Stephen Sinclair who divided the world into rugby and feminism and more or less left it there. It was rumoured that one night, on what a critic brilliantly described as 'the overworked sofa' David Geary allegedly fell asleep on stage. He denies it with the energy of John Key.

Tom Foolery; 5 May 2 June; a musical based on works of Tom Lehrer, the ghoul of foolery, featuring titles such as *Poisoning Pigeons in the Park*. It was a re-play from 1983, of "one of most stylish and successful shows ever staged here".

M Butterfly is supposedly based on the trial of a French diplomat Bernard Boursicat who goes to the opera in Beijing and falls in love with the beautiful diva Shi Pei Pu. He takes her to France where they live for 20 years before the truth is out – that there's more to her private parts than the public needs to know. Women were banned in Beijing opera

and are played by men. David Henry Hwang wrote a play, based on *Madame Butterfly* which won a Tony Award in 1988 – although one is permitted under the circumstances, to wonder if “Tony” was quite what he seemed.

June’ 1990; *Soluble Fish* presents a later night “musical theatrical delirium about the life and death of Mr B Fowkes,” created by the indefinable Bill Direen who describes it as “24 original songs with dances, rants and strokes of genius.” He goes on: “It’s a story in song but calling it a musical would be a bit tame. Our musical style is more acoustic than electric so calling it rock opera is not quite right either. We call it hybrid opera.” Now that’s the sort of language we need to see more of in the theatre.



The Sex Fiend 1990

Overall, 1990 seemed quite a raunchy year at Centrepont. Look at some of the titles: *Conjugal Rites*, *The Sex Fiend*, *Tomfoolery*, *Blithe Spirit*. Things are brought down from a testosterone high, however, by *Aunt Daisy*, the musical by Peter Hawes aka me. Here she is singing the ecstasies of love in ardent duet with her new-found man Fred:

FRED: We shall marry -

DAISY: (SEVERELY) - not in haste!

TOGETHER: Our ardour won’t exceed good taste...

And there were to be afternoon teas for \$25, “with normal discounts for beneficiaries and members.”

Then it was straight out of neenish tarts into weedish parts – the next ebullient comedy by Anthony McCarten, this time without *Ladies' Night* collaborator Steven Sinclair. "*Weed*," exclaimed director Jeff Kingsford-Brown "will do for farmers what *Ladies Night* did for the unemployed." Two financially fraught men-of-the-land, played by veteran Kevin Wilson and the incident-packed Lewis Rowe, plan to diversify into a product that "grows like a weed" – marijuana. (Actually the idea is food for thought, is it not? If we'd gone into dope instead of milk we would be a cleaner, richer and certainly greener nation.)

And in October 1990 *Weed* featured as a celebratory Centrepoint centrepiece for the first theatrical buffet dinner. As chef Gary Janson said, "The food will be laid out on long tables in front of the stage and patrons will come and help themselves." Now there's a chef who knows his stuff.

1991

1991 was the last year of the Cold War and first year of the Gulf War. It also saw the third encore of *Ladies Night* whose reception for some, was best summed up by Jason Flynn's, review of *Teechers* - another play of the same year. "So to all you theatre buffs out there, get along to *Teechers* otherwise we'll be subjected to another season of *Ladies Night*." They were indeed thus subjected and the writers were unrepentant. "You don't have to be a genius to see that the serious theatre community isn't going to condone something as popular as *Ladies' Night*," says Stephen Sinclair. And Anthony McCarten musing on the term "frothy" – (oft used to describe the play) says: "Frothy? A sponge is frothy, isn't it? I like sponge. You can get a knife through a sponge. It's better than fudge isn't it, where your knife bends as you try to cut through it? And some nights in the theatre in New Zealand, watching those arty, supposedly meritorious works, are a bit like fudge." And how sensible of Sinclair and McCarten - write your own huge grant enabling you to say "stuff the critics and the Arts Council" as you go about writing what you like. Their attitude smacks of the insouciant irreverence displayed by the three laggards in *Teechers* who take up drama at school simply because there's no exam at the end.

Then *Steaming*, which was probably the most heavily booked show of the year. But we wiz robbed! The eagerly awaited nudity didn't offend. It was not there with depraved intention or titivation or scrotal magnification. It was there to get us all down to the naked forked animal condition that King Lear ranted about. It was very funny but overall it was a depiction of the tough, desperate life under clothing. Nudity didn't offend but truth did.

In the Centrepoint version of *The Odd Couple* (Neil Simon), the protagonists have been transformed from fractious men to peevish women. To wit - a snobby Alison Quigan and a pristine Kathryn Rawlings.

Odd play out was *Me and my Friend* (Gillian Ploughman) about, said critic Lin Fergusson, "people not quite up with the play". Four psychiatric patients are released into a society that has no time, place or sympathy for them. Remember that glorious Tom Scott cartoon from the ghastly days of Ruth Richardson in which a white-coat stands in front of a hallful of bemused inmates, crying "You're all cured!" The highlight of the play was the presence on stage of Chris Curtis, now a moderate noise in Hollywood.

1992. *Nonsense*. What a jolly time was had each night of its season as audiences followed the merciful five from a leper colony off France to Bunnythorpe, off Manawatu. Winner of four critics awards in New York, the show sings and dances itself into the affections of all.

Pack of Girls remains the shakedown of a major talent getting into motion – it was David Geary’s first full-length play. Peg (Rachel Nash) a rugby widow, forms her own team and so on; All Black Mark Donaldson was a technical adviser. What a hoot. Geary is on record as saying the most difficult problem with the play was getting grass to grow inside.

More important than the play’s effect on you, was its effect on Alison Quigan who in post-OE-mode, came in for the opening night- “The response was overwhelming. The audience literally folded in half when they heard something they knew. And thus she tumbled onto the formula which later saved the theatre she had taken into her charge: “We did some research and worked out that all of the most successful plays since 1986 had been New Zealand works! All of them!”

And hence the invention of the Bunnythorpe gut buster.

Following this, came the glorious nonsense of *Dead Tragic*, born from the carcass of the *Aunt Daisy* tour (marooned for lack of cash in Christchurch) and involving 25 dreadfully morbid songs about lost love, death and general bad luck. It was engineered by clever Michael Nicholas Williams who took up the “pushing up daisies” theme and ran with it, inveigling us into asking without fee-ya what they did when they did what they did to Maree-ya?

Nowhere near as well attended was Athol Fugard’s wonderful *Road to Mecca* lit to several hundred candle-power by several hundred candles. It stars Des Kelly – only national actor to deliver lines in contralto – and Otago’s Louise Petherbridge as the curator of a mausoleum for a husband not lost nor loved, but deeply respected – “like Van Gogh” she adds. Director Alison Quigan confidently attested “it’s the type of challenging high-quality drama that people had been waiting for.” Alas, it wasn’t. People stayed waiting, on the outside of the theatre.

In the same year, was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, described by its author as “a trivial play for serious people.” For some it remains so witty, as to create ennui at its very mention.

Bouncers is staged again. A phenomenon far too fast-moving and complex to describe more than we have already. But *Standard* critic John Saunders recalled it thus: “I loved the way the cast proceeded to barge in and physically threaten individuals in the audience.”

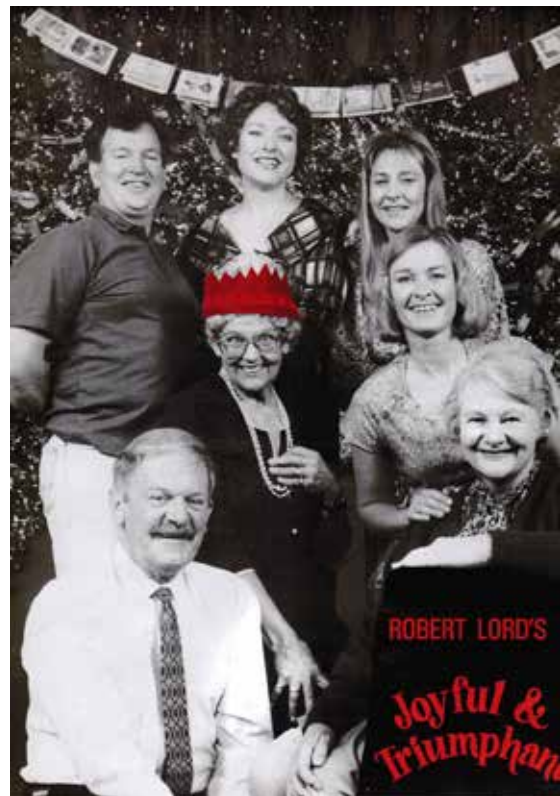
Triumphantly, **1993** was the first year, in all the land, that a theatre produced a totally New Zealand season of plays: *Stretchmarks* by Sarah Delahunty, *Joyful and Triumphant* by Robert Lord, *He Repo Haka* by Jeff Addison, *Let’s Spend the Night Together* by Anthony McCarten, *Lovelock’s Dream Run* by David Geary, *By Degrees* by Roger Hall, then the inevitable *Ladies Night*...

1993: *Stretchmarks* – The reign of women continues! Sarah Delahunty makes witty heroic couplets about babies emerging from orifices far too small; Katherine Mitchell, Glenys Whittington, Joanne Arbuckle and Vivian Bell play (private) parts of womanhood – as in extraordinarily private parts suddenly brought on-stage - and not always humorously; try singing *Kidding you kid* for laffs.

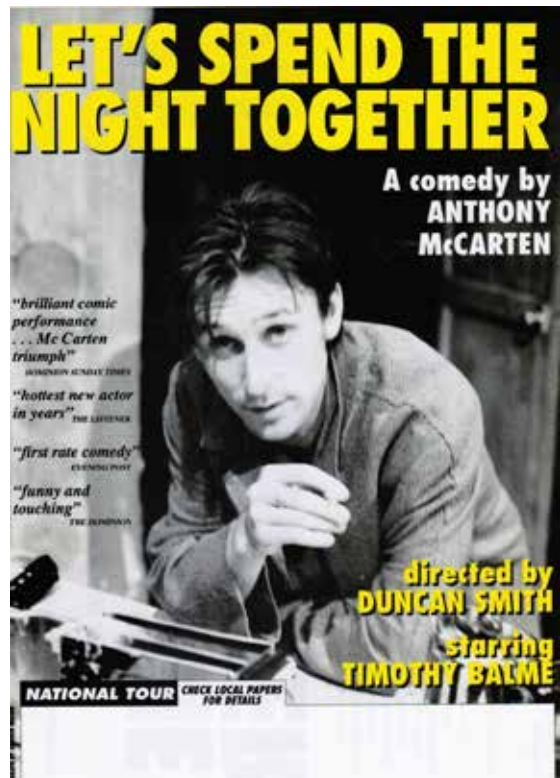
Robert Lord died unseasonably young in 1992, the same year his elemental play *Joyful and Triumphant* was judged Best New Zealand Play of the year. He called the work an “incidental epic” and incidentally it is an epic that will be produced in every theatre in the land every ten years or so, to monitor change and to watch its world lag further and further behind ours, a fading reminder of what was really right. Over eight Christmases throughout the play we associate with the same seven faces over the table – (and what faces! Norman Forsey, Dame Kate Harcourt, Dorothy McKegg et al). They are immortal; we simply grow older. Alison Quigan recalls Norman had the huge advantage, of being able to take his teeth out for the final scene.

Now how’s this for a compelling blurb for a play? *Let’s Spend the Night Together*, starring Tim Balme, directed by Duncan Smith “follows the journey of Rick Harris from his bed to his toaster and over to the record player”.

The only production from Roger Hall that year was *By Degrees* – four women setting out to degree themselves. It was not your traditional Hall-mark knee-slapper; more, it was one of Roger’s attempts to get out from beneath the millstone of phenomenal success that he had written himself under. This, like *The Rose*, and *Fifty-Fifty* for



Joyful and Triumphant 1993

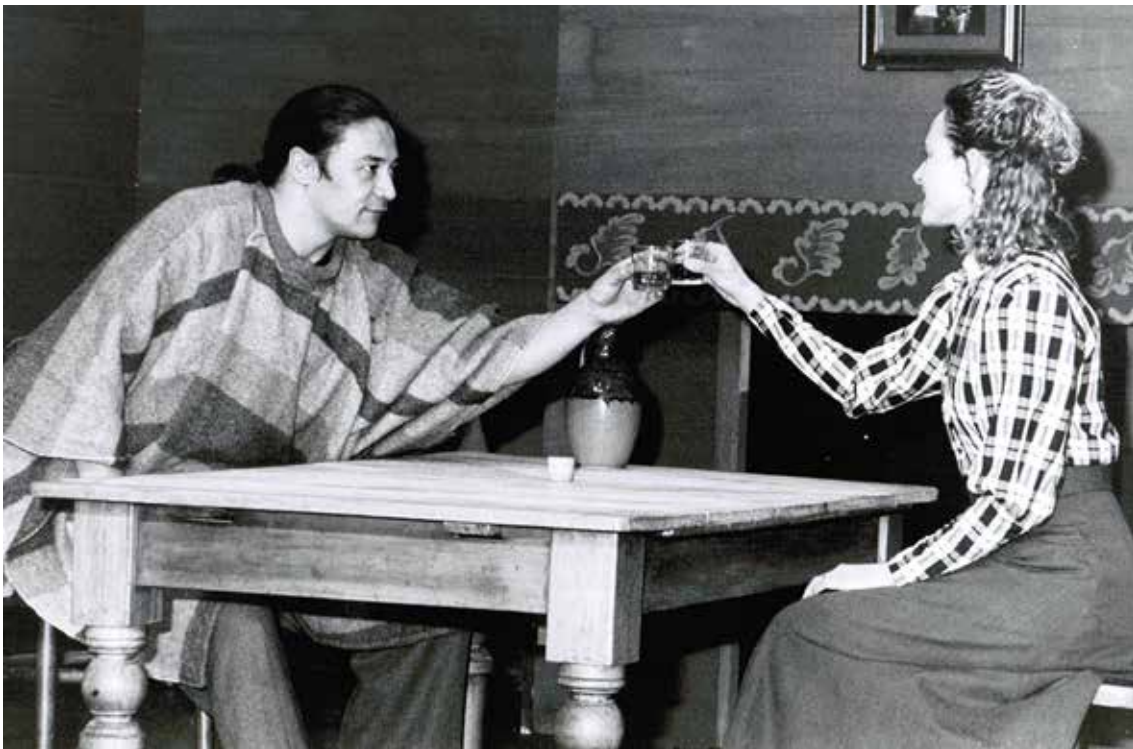


Let's Spend the Night Together 1993

example, caused an outcry of “un-Hall” that caused him to flee back to hilarity and the theatre of recognition.

Jack Lovelock’s Dream Run by David Geary caused a great kerfuffle of expectation among the participants of a script workshop in Australia. Howard (How-weird) is a whimp at a private school where he is bullied for being gay. The school’s sporting hero is Jack Lovelock which presumably means there is an oak in the grounds, given to Jack by Hitler for winning the 1936 Olympic 1500 meters. (The ultimate mystery is how did they get an 80 foot oak home on the boat?) Howard will go to Berlin and learn heroism from Jack. Off he sets in a dream. Which becomes a nightmare – Jack is not who he thought, and is certainly not gay. Howard will try to learn courage from Jean Batten instead -and doesn’t. A sadder and wiser schoolboy, he returns home and writes a play about Jack; it is a huge success in the school.

July 4 `93, *He Repo Haka*. And with it, Centrepoint ventures into bicultural theatre. *He Repo Haka – Swamp Dance* was commissioned from Jeff Addison and based on a Palmerston North factual incident (the Wood Street hostage drama of 1986 when a man held a woman hostage in her own house communicating only through a radio DJ and demanding musical requests as well as making threats and conditions). Addison adds another storyline to empower the tale – of a chirpy young Maori called Weka (Peter Kaa) who 100 years earlier walked into the house of a Scottish housewife whose husband was out draining the swamp.



He Repo Haka 1993

A splendid play all round – with a surreal codicil: Jeff Addison trundled over the Pukerua Hill one night to see that his house - said to be the oldest in Paekakariki – was ablaze in the distance. His wife Whitima Te Whare and 6 month-old daughter Te Aue were safe,

but the building was completely demolished. He had been commuting to PN during rehearsals for *Swamp Dance* - which featured the burn-off of a swamp whose flames threaten a house.

The ironies of colonisatory incarceration are rarely presented as luminously as they are in *He Repo Haka*. It asks the question "If England is such a fine place, why have you come here?" and the unsaid answer is of course; "to avoid the oppressive regime that I am now imposing upon you." And the complexities - you hate the Scot who is desiccating your swamps in order to plant gorse, but he is in fact your ally against the dreadful Te Rauparaha who would eat you if he could. Fine and deep stuff with Kaa, Amanda Rees, Matt Chamberlain and Glenys Whittington. A finely wrought script full of rigorous ideas, good jokes, and courageously unsentimental sentiments. The show is excellent, the songs are good – all complexly symbolised by Tigermouth as he declares: "Here I stand!" as he sits down.

The year 1994 is aptly summed up by the title of the third play of the year – *Legless*. It's more or less where the theatre stood at the time, teetering. And the fact a play about pigs could be called "lightweight" illuminates the prevailing confusion.

Here is a quote from a report to the Board: "*Palmerston North's first and only professional theatre turns 20 this year although financial pressure may mean it won't last much longer.*"

Ironically enough, the downturn coincided with the advent of the mighty BNZ as a supporting sponsor for a five figure sum. "This is the first ongoing financial support from the private sector for the theatre in its 19 year history," said manager John Smith, "the biggest investment the bank has made in the community."

Centrepoint very much needed the BNZ's generous support and Trust chairman Keith Thompson begged his council *to go to the theatre*. Prof Thompson would not reveal the extent of debt (just as the BNZ had never revealed the size of its funding). But the Prof added that "a considerable overdraft is fully extended". And there was a loan on the property. Things remained fragile. It was as if everyone involved with Centrepoint had said "Scottish play!" all at once.

A request to the PN City Council for the bone-dry Centrepoint exchequer to enable her a living allowance elicited this response in *The Standard*: "Dear Sir, Why can't she just take a pay cut?" signed Palmerstonian. Mayor of the time, Paul Rieger, clarified the whole situation by saying the theatre was a major cultural asset and that Ms Quigan was one of the most competent directors in the country, but that the council did not have a policy on grants such as that requested by Centrepoint.

And how did Alison Quigan respond to the crisis? Well, with all the suicidal resolution of either Romeo and of Juliet, she produced *Romeo & Juliet*, the first Shakespeare for 17 years! It could have led to financial disaster. Instead, as Keith Tynan said of the Peter Brook production (1947) - "It pelted one's ears with magic." Quigan further broke convention

by seconding five amateurs to make up the enormous Shakespearian numbers required (16!) And directed it! After cheerfully confessing she knew sweet Fanny Adams about the Bard! "And bummes, yclept in strong appariel did bring down their-selven upon ye theatrical seetes." It worked. 400 hundred-year-old William packed `em in.

Dear Management, I attended a performance of Romeo and Juliet on Saturday and am prompted to compliment you on an outstanding presentation. The production, staging, and acting was truly professional and your cast and team are to be congratulated for a memorable performance equal to anything I have seen on my many occasions at Stratford-upon-Avon when living in England. Yours sincerely, GB Evans.

At the show was much-loved doyen of local critics, John Ross (*Dominion*) who believes a better production is always possible, consequentially he avoids the superlative, in fact even the enthusiastic. He has single-handedly re-defined the word adequate. Here for example is his critique of *Romeo & Juliet*: "Most of the cast are adequate." Eight lines later "Vivien Bell is adequate" as (Jeff Boyd's) wife...and "Katherine Adamson was always competent." Overall he deems the production "worth seeing" – "although some colour-coding might have distinguished Montagues more clearly from Capulets." (Perhaps numbers could have been put on the jerkin-backs of Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo et al – in fact maybe football jerseys would have helped). Ross's major criticism of the acting was: "The emergence of Romeo and Juliet from her bedroom was rather weak." Ye gods! The most famous romantic couple in the history of the world *should* be bloody weak when they come out of the bedroom!

Then, in this year of living dangerously Quigan presented two plays just as dangerous as the works of the Bard – Maori plays! Riwia Brown, fresh from creating the film script of *Once Were Warriors*, brought her own new play *Roimata* to Palmy and began Centrepont's tradition of at least two Maori plays a year. The eeriness, strange fluting, profound differences of reaction charmed Centrepont audiences and the people came! A letter to the editor read as follows. *I could hardly get in. It was midweek and the play was Roimata with a Maori cast... There were queues – suits, jerseys, students the lot. Jim Moriarty was directing so I went. It would be lively. Lively? It was flaming! Funny, furious and filmic. ... Great gut chuckles, not from one-liners but from the depth of Maori character bursting like sunshine into the drama of real life today.* Signed Richard Campion, Havelock North. And we all know who he was.



***Roimata* Programme 1994**

Then to the second ethnic play. While *Roimata* enchanted them *Michael James Manaia* awed and terrified them. It was written by John Broughton (a retired dentist and military man – an uncannily apposite pairing) who took up writing plays and by 1988 had written eight of them. *Nga Pike* and *Te Hara* had been performed at the Depot and then along came *Michael James Mania*, completed in three weeks in July, 1990. It was read by Jim Moriarty not long after, who declared “this is mine! I want it!” He got it and what he did with it was... startling - look at the deep-stamped bare footprints on the Centrepoint stage after every performance. The work took its three protagonists, Mania, Broughton and Moriarty, into legend. But, oh god, do you realise what Manaia was doing at the climax of the play?

Theatrical circumstances were still strained but at least the media was wholeheartedly behind the Centrepoint cause. On Friday May 13 Manawatu Evening Standard Editor John Harvey wrote a powerful diatribe, damning all of those who didn't attend much theatre. ‘If you don't go,’ he said in essence, ‘there'll be nowhere for you to go: Centrepoint must be backed. ...Centrepoint has never been in great financial heart but now, for only the second time in its 20 year history it has reached financial crisis. This time round the theatre management is understandably nervous about whether the same commitment can be expected from its friends – if they do not support the theatre by attending shows there will be no shows to attend. There is another issue at stake this time, too. In the previous crisis Centrepoint's future depended on funding from QEII. This time the arts council has given Centrepoint an excellent cultural audit. It is to the city and the wider Manawatu – not Wellington – that the theatre is looking to for the support it needs. There was criticism from the public in the early '80s that the theatre was not providing the sort of entertainment people wanted to see. That is no longer the case. Last year it staged a wide variety of New Zealand plays but unfortunately in general the only plays that were well supported were money-spinners like Ladies' Night. People stayed away from more serious offerings... If a city that is trying to set itself up as a place that is different in its essence to the rest of NZ allows itself to lose a vital part of that essence, it is in effect undermining the very campaign it is prepared to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on. A city promoting itself as something special in terms of knowledge will look silly if the rest of New Zealand sees it can no longer support a theatre that has broken new ground in the range of drama it is presenting....

At the same time Quigan changed theatrical tempo and wowed her large audiences with the sublime local lunacy of her own first creation (with Ross Gumbley), *Five Go Barmy in Palmy*.

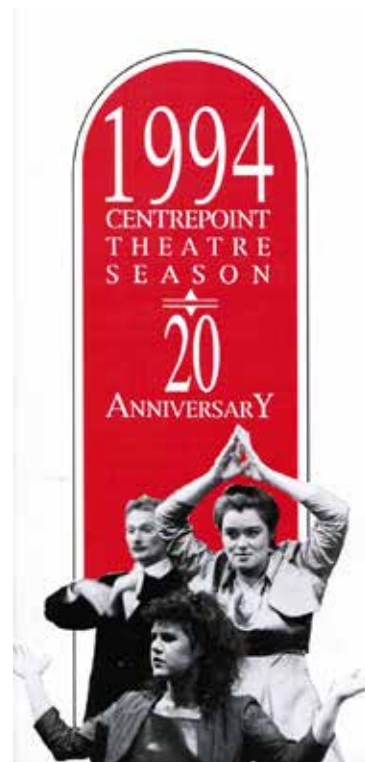
PS: Here's a nice wee snippet from the *Standard* March 9 1994: *if you don't enjoy the show tell the Centrepoint staff and they'll give you a ticket to another show.* So, folks, go to any show then pop over and tell Julie Barnes you hated it, and see what happens. Does Centrepoint still honour its word of 20 years ago?

Yep, those were the days.

1994: Twentieth anniversary time! - and a rather brave year for Centrepont. It started well enough. *Barmaids*, starring (only) Quigan and Vivian Bell, arrived in January towing “rave reviews” from the Sydney Opera House, probably because you could actually buy Fosters XXXX on stage. Two middle-aged barmaids confront dwindling trade which management is about to do something about.

In mid-March came *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* which drew critical comment such as “a play to love or hate” (*Standard*). All you need to do is chain three Irish, English and American men to a Middle-Eastern wall. When does the genius of Ms Quigan end? At the end of a difficult year she produces a joyless play about three men abducted in Lebanon, which had no movement, costumes or scenery, but was put on to save the day. And it almost worked.

1994 and new chairs accommodated bottoms at Centrepont, via a City Council grant. The last straw had been beaten out of many of the old seats by punters leaping up and down on them to the beat of *Ladies' Night*.



Season Programme 1994

Eddie Campbell, unknown to most of the 900 million viewers watching Anna Paquin as she collected her Oscar for supporting star in *The Piano*, whispering in shock her thanks to him for his tutelage of “heerr Scootish ack-sint”. Eddie emerged from a Centrepont rehearsal of *Legless* to find a TV crew ready to interview him. Which he handled with aplomb then set off downtown to get legless. He didn’t think his brief moment of international attention would change his career. And it hasn’t. He remains a fine and jolly fellow, and she remains a star.

1994. A letter to the cast, per medium of the editor: *I am a poor but enthusiastic theatre-goer. I was at the \$15 Sunday production this week and was greatly taken with your April in Paris (by John Godber.) You left quickly at the end before the audience had a chance to show their appreciation. The play was a wonderful story of relationships, the way we hurt each other without intending to; an enchanting new opportunity and the questions afterwards about life.* Signed Margaret Bennet, (Mrs). It was played in impeccable Yorkshirese by Ross Gumbley and Rachel Nash, two of the greats of Centrepont Theatre.

This was the last year of the great theatrical dinner. Actors would no longer have to compete with the crash of dropped forks or the squince of spoons across dessert bowls. As of now, “Centrepont Theatre and Licensed Restaurant” will be known simply as Centrepont Theatre. Many remember the last supper - *Entrees, garlic bread, potage du jour, Coq au Vin, or poisson a l'aioli with dessert – profiteroles Chantilly. Tea or coffee.*

1995. David Geary – a major force amidst New Zealand playwrights of our times. Like the late Dennis Potter, he is able to take mundanities such as girls’ rugby, middle -distance running and shearing and imbue them with the eerie ether of tremendous significance. And to prove he can spin it both ways he also takes the surreal and contains it inside the very ordinary. In this year he does it again with the third play in his “Country Trilogy” - *The Learner’s Stand*. It seems to be a dumb exposition of dumb blokes unwooling unwilling sheep but it isn’t. Geary’s plays are never what they seem.

In Centrepoint circles he is equally famous for his transforming a large old book containing eye-raising photos of the notorious Bert Potter’s Centrepoint pedodrome, into a brilliantly funny account of the Quigan years at Centrepoint Theatre. It still emerges from time to time from the depths of the Green room.

Five Angels by Hone Kouka: “This is a story with a beginning and no end. No end you say. Well, you see it starts in 1965 and is still going now. A beginning, and no end. It’s about a family, my family, and a dream, my brother’s dream... what’s his dream? It was to turn us into the next Howard Morrison Quartet.”

This was the first we were to hear of the now much heard-off Hone Kouka. Invited guests attended a Powhiri that introduced the show to its appreciative Centrepoint audience.

Then came the wonderful Lyndee-Jane Rutherford, starring as Amanda in a sort of sequel to *Five Go Barmy in Palmy*. She morphed from Enid Blyton to Captain James Bigglesworth VC and (wine) Bar. *Biggles on Top*, the next in the Quigan/Gumbley writing phenomenon is an adventure of exhausting exuberance. Are there still moas in the Ruahine ranges? Can Biggles save the NZ sheep industry from German plots? Can Snowy protect the Queen’s English? The answers are yes and no.

1996 and change is afoot. The gorgeous tit-arsery of *Biggles* continues amidst jack-hammers and cement mixers in the box office as the tiny bar is obliterated and a large and wholesome foyer emerges.

Then the magic of *Midsummer’s Night’s Dream* with an inspired three storey set by Bruce Graham – rather like the dream of an oil rig.

Fiona Samuel’s *Lashings of Whipped Cream*, sponsored by - not Fonterra but the BNZ – interestingly transforms the theatre into a bondage and discipline dungeon. With Lucy Schmidt doing the lashing and the whipping it is a funny, insightful and sometimes shocking comedy that tells you everything you’ve ever wanted to know or not about S&M – whether you really wanted to know or not. For research purposes, director Alison Quigan visited the premises of a working dominatrix and came away shaken but otherwise not physically harmed.

1996 – *Biggles, Lashings of Whipped Cream, Social Climbers* by Roger Hall - it seemed a fine year was in prospect until I, Peter Hawes has a monumental dry during the first act of *Cold Turkey* and thinks he is somewhere in the third. First night was a wreck –duo-actor of this two-hander (Peter Dennett), spent much of the first half taking second-half props off that Hawes had brought on prematurely. True trouper though he is, the season never quite recovered.

Fortunately, Roger Hall with his *Social Climbers* righted the year. While In April, Ross Gumbley introduced the town to the late-night *Scared Scriptless* show in which enthusiastically cold-blooded audiences watched brave and clever actors drop themselves into impossible situations then talk themselves out again. It was an instant and uproarious success.

Meanwhile squealing audiences packed into the best-named kids' show on the planet - *Skeleton on the Dunny!* Bob is orphaned, goes to live with Aunty Flo in the country with a long-drop on which Old Ned's skeleton had been found. Bob is determined never to venture within its precincts – then he gets the trots! All this for only \$5.

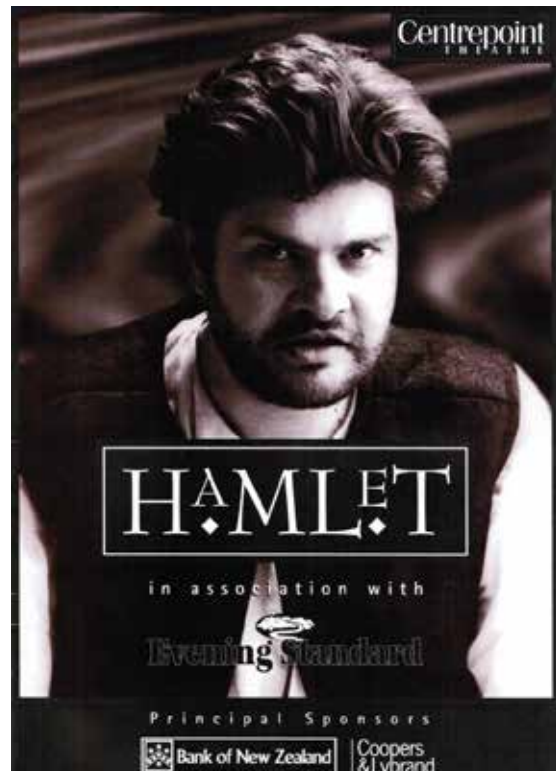
1997 and *Market Forces* – one of Hall's major blockbusters – arrived in a sort of 10th anniversary of the Crash. In the uncanny traditions of dramatic prophecy, it was written *about* but *before* the Asian financial crisis that, due to panic by the international community, policy mistakes in Asia and lousy "smartest men in the room" rescue programmes nearly reduced the world to pan-handling penury again. By popular demand the play was extended into the New Year, which happened to be hosting a heat-wave. Actors had to slump onto the stage in raincoats complaining about Wellington's wintery weather. Rain was created by strong water pistols, and mischievous imps such as Jeff KB and (it has to be said) Alison Quigan blasted off-stage actors into watery oblivion.

Blue Sky Boys: the Everly Bros, (now separated, alas, by death), were the most perfectly harmonic duet known. The show, by Ken Duncum, was astonishing; two no-longer-raging talents, played by Johnny Wraight and Craig Muller had to keep up with the Beatles on the day they arrived in the same town - and realised they couldn't. The music rocked nonetheless.

Travels With My Aunt in which the cast of four took turns at being Henry among others (one cast member had 11 roles but on morning radio on opening day could only name eight of them) was huge. In fact the cast of Ross Gumbley, Richard Edge, Malcolm Murray and Peter Hawes were described by an over-enthusiastic reviewer as "the four best actors in the world".

Then Geary's incident-packed *The Farm*, featuring a mounted ostrich head on the kitchen wall and a Russian couple – Malcolm Murray and Helen Jones. They decide after appraisal of farmer Duncan Smith that he could solve their problem: "We want sperm, your fastest swimmers, we want your Danyon Loaders." Farmer's wife Quigan is horrified until the financial offers reach irresistible proportions: "All right," she sighs, "I'll get a jam jar". This precipitated, one night, the most hysterical corpsing in the history

of the theatre. The response to the jam jar line had been thunderous; the cast had to wait for it to subside. But it was too much even for the cast. Alison Quigan lost it first and turned upstage as a good pro should, but the audience could see her shoulders shaking, which doubled their mirth. That caused the collapse of Smith & Jones. Last to go was Malcolm Murray who threw a blanket over his head and feigned illness but the heaving blanket quadrupled the laughter. Audience and cast rolled with laughter – a great several minutes of joyous bonding from both sides of the fourth wall. Marvellous Centrepont.



Hamlet Poster 1997

Hilarity was rather less evident in *Hamlet* – but by cripes Centrepont is good at Shakespeare! This was a luminous production. Gumbley was a mighty

tower of diffidence. Such mastery did he have of the role that when a light blew in the auditorium and scared the tripe out of the audience, he explained to them – in blank verse! – what had happened.

It was a terrific performance by Gumbley – his Hamlet broods and rages with equal authority and such horrific acts as the dispatch of Polonius seem more the result of commonsense than madness. Richard Edge, a most accomplished swordsman, was mighty pleased with his epee work in the play: “I was playing Rosencrantz. I was also doubling as Laertes. As a young, keen actor I had worked very much on my characterisation... I fought with my left hand as Rosencrantz and as Laertes with my right!” So steeped in his roles was he, he didn’t think the audience noticed there was only one of him in every duel.

And Edge again:

“Hamlet had just passed away with his ‘the rest is silence’, when the director’s young son called out, as only little boys can, with impeccable timing on opening night, ‘He’s not really dead, is he Mummy?’ All the corpses on stage proceeded to ‘corpse’ like mad.’ The little boy was Freddy, much-loved son of Alison Quigan and Bruce Graham, grappling for the first time with the exigencies of Existentialism.”

Then Hall’s *Social Climbers*, the biggest hit of 1996, returns to woo the same audience - with inevitable success.

But nothing compared to the new Quigan/Gumbley show *Boys at the Beach* in which - inadvertently but inspiredly - Robert Bell one night enunciated the ‘c’ word for perhaps the first time on Palmy precincts, to howls of approbation from the audience.

Boys at the Beach is the story of four young men who pool resources and buy a section at Pauanui. It's "based on a true story". The Quigan-Gumbley style had by this time become factually based and a community connection that has become a feature of Centrepont productions. Increasingly the writing duo was asking the public for information and stories to weave into their plays and hundreds responded to the request. It was a new form of audience participation; many people who attended the likes of *Netballers* and *Newbury Hall Dances* could see their own stories on stage.

Boys had it all: good jokes, antics outside the long drop, tent sex, a sausage sizzle and singsong, amazing back flips by Katherine Mitchell - as a delightfully appalling child - and a marvellous Bruce Graham set of sand - and rain! The cast included Ross Gumbley, Lucy Schmidt, Robert Bell and Simon Ferry. The largest member of the cast (Hawes) was deemed not large enough to play the original character (Coops) and was confined to a fat suit. But fat suits are for thinnish people and he couldn't get into it - art replicates art in the world of theatre. The same actor also rang the fellow he was portraying in order to prepare him for events: "In the play I portray you; you get married and you later die." A long pause ensued and then: "Married?!!!"

In October of that year a real death occurred - of Professor Keith Thompson, one of the mightiest supporters of the theatre from its very beginnings. He travelled the world and would return with news of plays to do from all corners of the circular world - and with wise suggestions about who should play whom. It was he, thank god, who had the foyer renovated into a habitable space for revelling and drinking without spillage of either alcohol or papal tissue. Alison Quigan was quoted in the membership newsletter of that month: "A pillar of our theatre has gone but you leave it strong enough to carry on without you. Thank you, Keith, and goodbye."

In May of 1998, the most disarmingly angular, innocently compelling performance ever seen at Centrepont occurred when Malcolm Murray ("He's a Leo and he has a tractor") strolled on stage with a piece of white rope, sat on the single piece of set - a stool - and tied "vertical cords" - knots - while relating, through the eating of whales, quantum physics, farming and love for a vegetarian macramist, the history of the universe. As he spoke he created structures of string as beautiful as his words. A bravura performance from a man who seems to have tossed it in and returned to the land. A profound loss to the theatre. "Did you know they've found granny knots in gorilla nests? Lots of grannies and the odd reef knot..." But, as he would doubtless say if you approached him, *Knot a Problem*.

Conversely it was also the year of *Trash*, reviewed thus: "Gross, repellent, uproarious..." "Goes way over the top but takes the audience with it..." "What I loved about *Trash* was its sheer foulness..." Written and performed by the unsinkable Lucy Schmidt assisted by Conrad Newport, Stayci Taylor, Kate Louise Elliott and Hera Dunleavy. 'Content was designed to offend'. And did; it was a sell-out. Lucy had had a similar introduction to the theatre as had Alison Quigan who had seen John Watson in *The Glass Menagerie* and been inspired towards a theatrical career. Schmidt's epiphany had been motivated by Quigan in *Shirley Valentine* in 1988.

“That night was electric for me; Alison coaxes an audience into the palm of her hand. Enthralled by her magic presence I decided then and there I wanted to be an actress just like her. Big shoes to fit! My first part was in *Five Go Barmy in Palmy* by Alison and Ross Gumbley with Lyndee-Jane Rutherford, Ross, Simon Ferry and the incredible Henri Rudolf lolloping behind us as Timmy the dog.”

The show was a sensation but: “It was around Christmas and we had a lot of work functions. They drank A LOT! I remember one guy got up on stage and started pulling his fly down to pee in the corner. Thank goodness Simon pointed him in the direction of the toilets!” It was this show also in which Gumbley fell through the stage and uttered his immortal line... “Just a stage I’m going through.”

It was a year of almost blockbusters. There was a Geary – *Pack of Girls*, an Anthony McCarten - *Four Cities*, a Shakespeare – *As You Like It*, a Godber – *Shakers*. But some seats remained unbummed. There was no way of knowing why –perhaps the influence of socially malevolent Ruth Richardson and her Mother of all Budgies. These were grim, grinding days, a time of looking over shoulders, a time of wondering if money for a night at the theatre might be needed for tomorrow’s bread. Ghastly, unnecessary days.

Then along came tones! They were the shrieking tones of Lizzy and Noeline from Rongotea and rugby supporters Swanny and Boxer supported by the apoplectic baritones of Professor Clifford Prout in *Shop Till You Drop* – which saved the day and the books. The Quigan/Gumbley combo was rapidly gaining on RH (Right Honourable) Roger Hall in bumsonseatability and theatrical sustainability.

1999. 25th gala performance 1 May, *Dirty Weekends*, Roger Hall’s twelfth play at Centrepoint - a vegetal musical about gardening so skeletal in its schemata that actors, on first reading, thought it was an IQ test to create a play from the bits provided. They worked hysterically hard. Inevitably the show filled the house. Lyndee-Jane Rutherford chewed a mouthful of Budget Compost every night. It was later discovered to be potentially poisonous.

Earlier in the year had been the sensationally acclaimed and much awarded *Krishnan’s Dairy*. The *Listener* said “such riveting theatre that you would need a heart of reinforced concrete not to be captivated..!” Knowing Jacob Rajan, his next play will be called “Reinforced Concrete”.

And *Solid Gold Hits*, by David Geary. “Sex, hugs and rock’n’roll” as the bumf proclaimed. It’s about a DJ up a tree. Will Geary ever cease weaving the real with the surreal? Hopefully not.

C’mon Black! written by Roger Hall for Grant Tilly (whose woes of his West Coast tour of this same play are rather amusing. He felt that the vast success of the play should be spread to the smaller provinces so organised pub venues on the WC, from Hokitika to Westport, and off he set. To be greeted by a first audience so small it could rightfully be called an audient. “You told my agent Monday was the perfect night for a play!” he exclaimed to the publican in Hokitika. Who agreed, “Yeah, it is. No one comes in on

a Mundy so you wouldn't be bothering the punters." Tilly spent three weeks wandering disconsolately up and down the Coast to almost non-existent audiences.)

Tilly at Centrepont was, as always, superb; he opened his big suitcase set and began...except on one night. He stopped in mid expostulation and said; "I'm sorry, I've forgotten." He strode off and returned with the script – which he read seamlessly. It was later ascertained he had suffered an on-stage stroke.

This reading was itself a noble achievement because his eyesight was disastrously weak (a dreadful imposition on one who was also an artist and cabinet-maker – and who some years later manufactured his own glorious coffin). The script was held just beyond his eyelashes.



Newbury Hall Dances 1999

The year ended with *Newbury Hall Dances*, perhaps the acme of the Q/G collaborative, cementing the Centrepont tradition of plays that involve and reflect the experiences of local audiences – who were invited to contribute material. Volunteers told stories of boot bars and backseat hi-jinks. The evidence suggested that more residents of the Manawatu were conceived in the shrubbery and Ford Anglias of Newbury, than in the bedrooms of the suburbs.

2000

The world did not explode; the stock market did not crash, bank vaults did not swing open revealing billions in family trusts, secret breast implants on Hollywood celebrities did not explode at important social functions and planes did not fall from the sky. The whole superstitiously IT-bonded world had got it wrong – there wasn't going to be a Y2K.

It was a year of extremes – from the sublimity of *The God Boy* to...*Kiwifruits*. *The God Boy*, what a play! It inspires you to raise a glass of Glenvale Burgundy (17 proof) in thanks to Ian Cross for taking you to so many crossroads in cultural New Zealand.

And it was the year of – the '*Scottish Play!*' Or the *Comedy of Glamis* or *The Scottish Business* or simply *The Play* – anything except *MacB...* argh, I was nearly hit by a falling comet! Coming to terms with the terms imposed by the rules of *MacB...*(aargh!) is daunting. ("Go outside, turn round 3 times, spit on the floor and then knock for re-

entry”) And you do! Acting in *MacB...* (aargh!) is as jolly as breastfeeding a vampire bat (as Mrs hand-washing MacB... aargh...would attest). Yet despite the play’s appalling record of bad luck, every actor wants to be in the damned thing! Its first production in 1606 resulted in the death of an actor and Will himself had to step in (as Lady Macbeth would you believe). It wasn’t performed again until 1703 when opening night coincided with the worst storm known in England until then. Queen Anne blamed the weather on the play, closed it down and ordered a week of stately prayer. Charlton Heston’s much later performance was abandoned when the witches’ fire set fire to the set and the audience fled. More recently *Cheers* star Kelsey Grammer had to close the doors on his self-financed Broadway production of the play after it was monstered by critics.

Macbeth’s story much resembles Adolf Hitler’s – enormous initial success then a sinking into rearguard resistance for the rest of his life. But Jonty Hendry builds a character seeking glory not suicide and endows him at the end with a sort of horrible magnificence. His “Lay on McDuff” is not desperate, it’s enraged and confident. Oh, and a little aside - Hendry challenged all superstition by trundling up from Wellington each day on the Capital Connection. Never once was he late for his first words: “So fair and foul a day I have never seen.”

One of the great plays of that year - and any year - (translated as usual from the French by Chris Hampton) was *Art* by Yasima Reza. Deeply frivolous and searchingly nonsensical, it took you nowhere with profound profundity, except into the psyche of the three men, one of whom had bought this painting. He obviously liked its clarity. It was white – it was nothing else.

The provenance of this play was as wild as the white painting that starred in it: Sean Connery’s French wife Micheline saw the play in Paris, 1995. She bought the rights. The canvas, with its 50 layers of white paint (see *Goldie*, by this writer that Mrs Connery



Art 2000

never bought the rights to, dammit) was seen as a masterpiece... by some. The on stage argument over the work involved Grant Tilly, Ken Blackburn and Ross Gumbley and as a consequence was superbly played. You look into the deep blankness of the work and you just know that you're looking at the nullity of the universe and yourself while the three buffoons, Marc, Serge and Yvan politely argue over what it is or isn't. The play won a Tony and a Laurence Olivier Award both, one assumes, with nothing on them. The painting has so far won nothing.

Mid-year Ms Quigan addressed the Recreation, Leisure and Culture bit of the Palmerston North City Council with fire in her belly. "Centrepont is the only professional theatre in the country not supported by its local council – Fortune Theatre gets \$41,000 from Dunedin's city council yet attracts only 10,000 patrons a year whereas we have twice that number through our doors." A few days later she was "blown away" when PM Helen Clark gave \$146 million to the arts - 'about three times more than we were expecting'. ("But," quoth the ravine Ms Clark, "nevermore.") "We had been saying it and saying it for years and there she was in front of us saying it back to us and telling us what we did was valuable," said Quigan.

Despite the loyalty of the Palmerston North community, not quite all agreed. From a Letter to the Editor: "I am aware they have to pay their actors but as they own the theatre this is not a large outlay. Amateur theatres are struggling to keep their heads above water and any injection into the theatre world should go to them..."

A play called *Mumma* was to have been written by the exuberant Lucy Schmidt. However her work had to be replaced when the national tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – featuring Schmidt – was extended. Schmidt's plays were renowned for their Rabelaisian gusto but the substitute, *Closer* by Patrick Marber took scatology to a new level. "Marber has deserted the polite surfaces of romantic comedy to tell it like it is," wrote Elric Hooper of his Court production of the play. And this "exploration of attitudes to sex" was obviously appreciated for it won the (London) *Evening Standard* Award for best comedy, the Laurence Olivier Award for best new play and others. It was a naughty sensation in London where performances were sometimes accompanied by the energetic rustle of raincoats.

Meanwhile, Lucy Schmidt may have lost a play but she'd gained a movie. While holidaying in Canada she auditioned for a part in a Jack Nicholson- starring, Sean Penn-directed movie *The Pledge*. And got the part! She had read only three audition lines when Penn drawled: "That's enough. Can you do me a favour? Go tell those other women that they haven't got the job." "You're f**cking joking!" she cried. "I'm f**cking not!" replied Penn. She played a retarded woman in a farmhouse that the Jack character, in Nebraska, wanted to buy. "He (Penn) chose me for my look and attitude. He acts on instinct and didn't care if I was a prom queen from LA or Lucy Schmidt from Woodville." She played six immortal scenes with the great Jack but remains jolly and has never had a Botox or a face-lift.

So, to the end of a millennium.

Into the Noughties

2000 AD and Roger Hall returns Dickie Hart. He has recovered from *C'Mon Black's* trauma at loss of the World Cup but – and nearly as bad – has sold the farm and moved to the city. It's called *You've Got to be Joking* – Dickie's not joking, he's deeply depressed but divinely funny.

And then *The Big OE*; the newest Guigan/Gumbley odyssey of idiots. With Ross Gumbley, Alison Quigan and thrustingly ebullient Kate Louise Elliott in the cast you're going to have trouble doing any upstaging work, especially with the mischievous combo of Quigan and Shirley Kelly as two biddies abroad:



The Big OE 2000

Gracie: My word Jean, there's a lot of people on this(Dover/Calais) ferry.

Jean: It's a very popular route.

Gracie. Calais of course is the gateway to the Continent.

Jean: Oh, yes. A bit like Rongotea is the gateway to Palmerston North.

Gracie: It's nothing like Rongotea! For a start they don't speak English.

Jean: They speak French.

Gracie: And they eat a lot more garlic.

Nonetheless the stage belongs to the brawly, sexy Cath McWhirter making her Centrepont debut as Ozzie sheila Sharlene who can render vowels flatter than a King's Cross pizza-maker. *The Big OE* brought a triumphal conclusion to the millennium – 42

performances. *Tronk's Tours* skim you across Europe in ten days and the consequences show in two hours of uproarious theatre. Tronk's bus, a working Heath Robinson model, became one of the stars. What front seat audiences didn't know was that its lock was so limited that they were in peril of road death at any time. There were no casualties and the year ended in jubilation and modest wealth.

So here we are in **2001**, the year of eyeballs and nuclear physics.

Eyeballs: Jeff KB ("out vile jelly!") shuffling down the raked stage of *King Lear* in pursuit of the tiresome Gloucester's eyeballs which, having being plucked, are rolling audiencewards. Worse, one night one of the eyeballs, made by Carlos Slater, was trod on by Lyndee-Jane Rutherford and adhered to her sole for the rest of the scene. The mighty KC Kelly, one of our few Broadway veterans, was a gloriously woeful Lear, humbled into a shambling wreck on the heath by hubris, dumbness and ego – and yet as majestic as he was in his imperious prime. The cast was as powerful as you could fit on the Centrepoint stage; Tim Spite glorying as the Fool in vindictive, well - spite; the schizophrenic Edgar played by both halves of the wonderful Richard Edge, the sulky daughters Lucy Schmidt and Lyndee-Jane Rutherford, the unsulky one (Cordelia) Cath Harkins whose death induces five long "Woes's" from her father. Cheryl Amos, Jeff KB, Kane Parsons as Poor Tom, Peter Dennett as Kent, and the divine little non-paid Mark Kilsby – and me, as blind Gloucester blundering round the stage as usual. It was a monumental production. "Blow winds...!" blew them away.

A letter from a fan: *"I was at Lear last night and thought it was magnificent in every respect. If there was no immediate thunderous, prolonged applause at the end it was because we were still in the play, long after you had left the stage."* Signed: Basil Poff, 28 June 2001 (historian at Massey, actor who portrayed Hamlet's father's ghost, and writer of a book about how they shipped draught horses to the Crusades)..

And to nuclear physics. In *The Candlestickmaker* Jacob Rajan pays homage to ducks, happiness and the Indian inventor of the Black Hole, Subramanyan Chandrasekhar, a former student of Ernest Rutherford. The play was booked out five weeks before it actually arrived in Palmerston North.

In *No. 2*, 24 year old Toa Fraser wrote a one-hander performed by 20 year old Madeleine Sami. The play required her to be two toddlers fighting at one stage whilst also singing the background music. She is nine characters in all, beginning at 4 am as elderly Nana Maria who is going to pass the head-of-the-houseship on to another member of her Fijian family. Her performance was enchanting; she promoted *No.2* to *No.1*.

In this auspicious year the multi-talented Alison Quigan was awarded the Queen's Service medal, so well deserved and the cause of much celebration in Palmerston North and at Centrepoint.

2002: And *Ladies Night* is back. “The story of five mates,” said the blurb, “with strong healthy bodies...” And lunch boxes the size of – well – lunchboxes. So, ten years since its last appearance and bolstered, ironically enough, by the hooaha from the obvious plagiarism of the *Full Monty* movie, here it was again, complemented later in the year by *Manic Opera* at which blokes do the ogling.

In the tradition of *Dancing at Lunasa* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* we must have our annual Irish play – this time, *Stones in His Pockets*, with the hugely charismatic and generally huge Phil Grieve. Curiously, it involves the same desire to be part of a Hollywood movie as did *The Cripple*.

And mid-year – the enigmatic *Feedback*, with lovely Tim Finn music sung by the lovely Madeleine Sami, Steve Tofa and Matthew Dwyer, with book by literary archangel Toa Fraser. The plot is an afternoon’s preparation for a gig presided over by Guido – who doesn’t turn up, resulting in what a witty reviewer named *Waiting for Guido*. Theatre staff noted for *Feedback* more pre-production time was put into the creation and positioning of an eagle on stage than either words or music. The show did a mere 38% business and the Sydney Opera Company cancelled a planned season of the show.



Tim Finn & Toa Fraser Feedback 2002

But there were financial compensations. While Ross Gumbley had departed to artistically direct at Court Theatre in Christchurch, Alison Quigan had replaced him as literary partner, with Lucy Schmidt. Their first endeavour had been *Sisters* which outsold the fabulous *King Lear* and their next co-operative *Netballers* resulted in the same terrific level of business. And again, the local community was invited to contribute their stories



Netballers 2002

and memories. “They told us about the freezing fingers, the short skirts,” said Quigan – “but they always turned up on Saturday morning at Vautier Park. Lucy caught the bus from Woodville to PN to play every Saturday; and I had lived behind the park all my young life: The sound of pounding feet – and whistles. Lots of whistles!”

The punters flooded through the doors to see the play they themselves had contributed incidents to. However, flooding can result in a disaster. Cheryl Amos, a cast member of *Netballers*, wrote thus: “I remember the night we had a (certain) used car corporation audience who, drunkenly out of control, hounded us so much – spilling onto the stage (which was a netball court of course), stealing our prop baby and haranguing us with the vitriolity that can only be whipped up by mob mentality, pushing us to the limit until you, Peter Hawes, snapped and did the unthinkable. You snuck behind the seating with a broomstick and pushed their bottles of booze over.”

This was the year Alison Quigan became a member of the esteemed club of top ten-selling playwrights – the only woman on the list. It nicely augmented her gong for services to the theatre. Lucy Schmidt recounts an instance of Quigan’s heroic service. “*In Pack of Girls* one of the girls pinged her calf and it was obvious she could hardly walk let alone play rugby. A call was put through to Alison, the director, and we were pretty sure a cancellation would mean we could be at the Albert earlier than anticipated. But no, she rushed in, threw on a rugby jersey and stood – without a script – saying “just push me in the general direction of where I’m supposed to be”. We were worried as the rugby games were all choreographed but we needn’t have worried as Alison began stealing the show. She made up what she couldn’t remember as the director. Later Alison said “That’s the most fun I’ve had on the stage for years”. We were in awe but she pointed out it was us that had to do the work and get her into place – she just hung on for the ride!”

It was a grand year for Centrepoint theatre, with Witi Ihimaera’s *A Woman Far Walking*, directed by Nancy Brunning. Yep, she’d walked far all right – born on the day the Treaty was signed at Waitangi, she’d been walking ever since and had effectively reached the ripe old age of 162 when the show came to Centrepoint.

The show of the year – and perhaps the decade – was Tom Scott’s wonderfully moving *Daylight Atheist*, one-handed by the wonderful Grant Tilly and directed by the uber-active Danny Mulheron.

And the year ended with “the funniest play ever written about the theatre” - Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off*. There were noises *On* also from the poor schmucks in the play who were stranded on the set as if on the KonTiki for 40 minutes as they waited for the revolve to revolve on pre-production night.

2003 began in gender-biased mode, with *The World’s Wife* and then the rather unsubtle *Vagina Monologues* in which women speculate at some length over the personality of their aforementioned labia minora and what differences it had made to their lives. “What would it say? It’s not like that. It’s not like a person who speaks. It stopped being a thing that talked a long time ago. It’s a place. A place you don’t go. It’s closed up, under

the house. It's down there....It reminded me of how the early astronomers must have felt with their primitive telescopes. I found it quite unsettling at first..." The show created the same dilemmas as, say *The Sex Fiend* or *Closer*. People might want to go but going means being seen going – so you don't.

Now let's scuttle to the triumphal return of *Middle Age Spread* described by its creator as: "A simple idea, a dinner party that the hosts didn't particularly want to give and none of the guests wanted to be at." A trouble-free outline which can then be filled to the gunwales with trouble.

Then, the first play from lively actor and ex-fisherman Jamie McCaskill - *Wassup Bro?* about two Maori brothers re-meeting in the Coromandel. It won Best of Fringe 2003 and gave the theatrically complacent Maori culture a rigorous reboot. It showed that things were are not always as traditionally portrayed on stage – big poles, dried ice, whistle music, Rangī coming to town to be polluted by whitey – new views were required. And we got them through the eyes of young McCaskill.



***Wassup Bro?* 2003**

The year was chugging along nicely; no one saw the iceberg coming. "Iceberg!" The Dean Parker-adapted *Book of Fame* (from the book by Lloyd Jones) was a splendid story of the first All Black tour of Britain and was expected to well exceed its target audience in a rugby-loving province. But it did only 28% and was pulled a week early. Why? Dunno. For me, the actors acted convincingly but didn't play rugby convincingly. No one goes to see our national game ineptly portrayed. So the theatre was teetering once more – only two plays that year had made budget. Creative NZ of course rushed to the rescue – of its own money - and withdrew the three-year budget, putting Centrepunt on a gut-wrenching yearly "wait-and-see" basis.



Mum's Choir 2004

Quigan to the rescue. Her end-of-year offering – *The School Ball* – involving hair, dresses and condoms - ran into Christmas after 42 hectic performances, money jangling in its pockets. Hooray! ROCHELLE: “I’m not going. I can’t afford it. It’s only one night, eh?” CHANTELE: “No way! It’s **the** night!” Now that’s the attitude that gets derrieres on upholstery!

2004: Another significant anniversary - the 30th. In May politicians, other VIPs and Centrepont supporters attended a birthday party, complete with cake.

The feature play was the Quigan-penned *Mum's Choir*, filled with lovely harmonies. It was a big hit with audiences and by its final night the theatre was back on track.

The year also featured the standard Hall ball-breaker, *Spreading Out*, involving pinot noir and Colin and Elizabeth, three generations on from *Middle Age Spread*.

Then came Ibsen’s own form of noir - *A Doll's House*, starring the magnificent Rosella Hart. The play had given such a shocking depiction of 19th century happy marriage that Ibsen was asked to change the ending! (And naturally refused.) In fact, so ghastly was the conclusion that the first heroine - Nora - (in Copenhagen 1879) refused to play it.

Then, to cheer up proceedings, a nightly Kightly romp – *Niu Sila* – (think “god defend niu Sila”) co-written by Oscar Kightly and clever David Armstrong. Multiculturally it gave us New Zealand at its most multi.



The Legend Returns 2001

In mid-July the theatre received a short visit from the touring *Meeting Karpovsky*, played and written by Helen Moulder. Also in attendance was Sir Jon Trimmer who said very little but he was there, and a finer *there* it would be impossible to find. Ms Moulder has devised what we may best call middle-class Poor Theatre - if you can muster a small audience she will perform her works in your living room. In 2001 her

tour of *The Legend Returns* called in for 13 performances at the beginning of the year and 13 years later her new work *Gloria's Handbag* reached our stage as well. She plies her theatrical trade between New Zealand and the eastern seaboard of Australia, as an independent, graciously talented diva.

But all preceding works were inevitably blown away at the box office by Quigan's Christmas blockbuster *Girls' Weekend Escape*. "Self-indulgent fun," she called it. It was inspired "by a trip to Melbourne with my sisters; we went to do the town and have some fun, away from servicing other people's lives and ended up laughing our socks off". The curtain, so to speak, went up on the play in October, and then, shockingly, came down on her career at Centrepont. She left that very month for Auckland and a role in *Shortland Street*. She had arrived in Palmerston North with her husband and a toddler in 1986 and after 100 plays was resigning from the job.



Girls Weekend Escape 2004

Here is her legacy:

1994 *Five Go Barmy in Palmy* ((Quigan/Gumbley)

1995 *Biggles on Top* (Quigan/Gumbley)

1997 *Boys at the Beach* (Quigan/ Gumbley)

1998 *Shop Till You Drop* (Quigan/Gumbley)

1999 *Newbury Hall Dances* (Quigan/Gumbley)

2000 *The Big OE* (Quigan/Gumbley)

2001 *Sisters* (Quigan/Schmidt)

2002 *Netballers* (Quigan/Schmidt)

2004 *Mum's Choir* (Quigan)

2004 *Girls' Weekend Escape* (Quigan)

2009 *Ladies For Hire* (Quigan)

Shop 'til you drop with your royalties, sweet girl.

2005 and the Simon Ferry years begin.

At the beginning of this year, a remarkable thing happened. Dear old John Ross -abandoning “adequate” and “sufficient” - heaped unequivocal praise upon a play. It was the almost unknown *Drawer Boy*, an American work (“adapted from Canadian” as one reviewer inexplicably averred). Of it, the uber-conservative Ross said “once in a while a show comes along in which the play, the directing and the acting are of such a high order and meld so seamlessly, that its moving-along appears effortless and one is conscious only of the characters in action, not of the actors.” Praise indeed – the review still contains a caution: “In the company of two such gifted actors at the peak of their craft Matt Wilson’s rendition is still very good if not at the same level as (Eddie Campbell’s)”. He then relents a little: “Being an actor playing an actor allows for a different kind of playing.” In fact they were both amazing.

When a review begins with “He deserves every accolade for having the courage to tackle this demanding and controversial piece of theatre...” you know it’s not a bestseller. This was *Guantanamo*, an absolutely searing depiction of the George Bush-created concentration camp in Cuba. It’s the sort of show the villainous Republican Tea Party members should be



Guantanamo 2005

obliged to watch every night – but don’t. And nor, alas did Palmerston North. It was a great play, perfectly directed by Simon Ferry and splendidly acted. Reviewer Ray Watchman praised the lovely, perennially barefooted Ralph Johnson “who gave one of the finest performances of its kind this reviewer has ever had the privilege of experiencing”. A compelling testimony that the War on Terror **was** the Terror.

Simon Ferry then leapt into the deep end with his first production as Artistic Director and came up with *The Merchant of Venice* which, like *Othello*, and *Mein Kampf*, can’t be performed comfortably in these days of dictatorial PC. It was rapturously received “Bravo Centrepont. Bravo Simon Ferry. Bravo Ian Harman (costumes). Bravo cast,” exclaimed a reviewer. KC Kelly’s “cultivated air of sarcastic contempt and timing is fantastic” enthused another critic. And Jane Donald rendered the famous “quality of mercy” speech as if it had never been heard before.

John Ross’s only criticism was aimed at some of the minor characters who “need to watch their diction”. I was the major villain. I was the Duke who had to lecture the errant Jew – a daunting experience: KC – a leading lecturer in masterclass acting - stared down my stuttering attempts at majesty each night and shrivelled me to a walnut. I didn’t need to watch my diction - there wasn’t any. But I still love KC like a chocolate cake.

It's a curious play – we must assume Shylock stands for the ye Olde Testament “eye for an eye” and Portia represents the Jesus Christ-type mercy stuff. So where does that leave Antonio, the Aristotle Onassis-type shipping magnate? But for all that it's a hoot of a play and was the last Shakespeare at Centrepont, to date.

After it came David Geary's *A Shaggy Dog Story*. And has he written a simple shaggy dog story? No, of course not. It is shaggy dogs telling their own stories – isn't that what the title says? Isn't that the way Geary always writes? He gives you laughter but demands thought in return.



A Shaggy Dog Story 2005

Then the clever, convoluted *Wheeler's Luck* with rubber men Nigel Collins and Toby Leach hilariously re-enacting the lives of **fifty-five** residents of the unremarkable little town of Bell End. And then *The Underpants* – described by director Simon Ferry as “serious silliness” - hauled out of Austrian obscurity (Carl Sternheim, 1910, adapted by Steve Martin) and giving reign to the corpulent dignity of Phil Grieves (divinely described as the “walrusy Theo” by reviewer Richard Mays) and the manic, eyeball-rolling brilliance of Matt Wilson. The story revolves around events ensuing when the knickers of a pretty wife (played by Rosella Hart) of an undistinguished bureaucratic flunky (Theo) fall down as the king is passing in a regal parade.



The Underpants 2005

2006: Still on uncladness, *The Graduate* – an adaption by Terry Johnson of the famous movie –involved full-on naked nudity in its most decorous form – 33 times; coo coo katchoo Mrs Robinson. No one was offended by Donogah Rees’ uncladness which was not gratuitous, it was beautiful and inevitable – it was what Mrs Robinsons have done, to their own advantage, for at least 500,000 years.

Then Simon Ferry created doubt in *Doubt* which has never really been resolved - did he dunnit in this priestly whodunit? And David Geary gave a deservedly vicious interpretation of the 1981 underarm incident in *Underarm* before the short, unslim blond beauty Lucy Schmidt brought the theatre home with 45 productions of her late season’s *Weighing In*.



Weighing In 2006

2007

Wow, what a rocky road! *The Bowler Hat*, *Antigone’s Death*, *The Tutor*, *The Glass Menagerie* – brilliant plays all, but perhaps no longer what was desired by Centrepont audiences. The taste was clearly for New Zealand plays and not until David Geary’s *The Farm*, did things get up and running. Then came the sublime *Lullaby Jock: The Silent Generations* – one of the wonderfulest performances e’er seen; written and performed by Simon Ferry, about his father, on a set of at least a thousand bottles. One hopes it was the beauty of the performance and not the 1000 bottles that is leading me to write this fulsome review. Ferry’s father Jock died in 1991. Simon asked his mother if he could write his tale. “My father was a joker, everybody loved him, he was the life of the party but underneath, at home, he had been torn apart by WWII. He would wake up screaming in the night, He was an alcoholic – he was never violent but extremely difficult to live with.” Holy cow – comparable with Tom Scott’s *Daylight Atheist*. Two difficult men – spreading their difficulty as if trying to dilute it.



Lullaby Jock 2007

A further difficult man - difficult to himself more than anyone else - featured in *The Hollow Men*, based on Nicky Hager's book about the wife and times of Don Brash: "He was moulded by spin and got spun around," said director Jonty Hendry. Steven Papps who played him brilliantly was always a little offended to be told how alike he and Brash seemed.

The year was brought to a pleasant conclusion by the success of Ross Gumbley's *Happy Couplings* in which, after interval, the cast change gender like estrogen-affected estuarine fish.

2008: Simon Ferry's notes on his days as Centrepont Artistic Director reached us, via tom-tom, from an English-as-foreign-language school somewhere in deepest Uganda, where he now resides.

His first production in 2005, as we know, had courageously been a Shakespeare – *The Merchant of Venice*. It had enthused audiences and charmed critics. Even the diffident *Listener* - who rarely reviewed Centrepont productions - liked it.

Ferry's story goes as follows: "I was Artistic Director of Centrepont Theatre just shy of four years, but my involvement is over a much longer period. When I wanted to become a professional actor I made an appointment to see Alison Quigan, the then director. She steered me in the right directions, and was good enough to offer me employment after I graduated drama school. I couldn't take up her first offer, having broken my collar bone playing rugby, just weeks before the production of *Romeo and Juliet* began.

“Undaunted, she continued to offer me roles as an actor and director over the next decade. In 2004, after a five year stint running the UCOL Drama programme, I stepped into the large high heel shoes left behind by Alison. Soon after my appointment as Artistic Director I met Danny Mulheron in the Circa bar, who quipped: “Ahh the man given the poisoned chalice.” The point being that following a director with such a long tenure is a precarious thing to do in the precarious world of the theatre.

“Alison had spent many years establishing a loyal audience and was synonymous with keeping the theatre alive and feeding the theatrical appetite of provincial New Zealand. When I told people I was the Artistic Director, many expressed surprise that the theatre was still open, asking; “How could Centrepont still run without Alison at the helm?” I was determined to keep the theatre driving forward into new areas, and to outlive Danny’s well-meant but pessimistic greeting.

“The first production I directed was *The Merchant of Venice*. One of the biggest problems we had was managing the departure of Bruce Graham, Centrepont’s previous set and costume designer, set constructor and stage manager etc. We hired Shelley Irwin as production manager, a new grad fresh out of Toi Whakaari. The design required a total Centrepont transformation into theatre of the round. Shelley needed some ‘muscle’ for the change and arranged ten volunteer students to help the shifting of the stage. As we waited for our ten burley 7th formers to arrive, ten seven year olds from the local primary school walked in the door. There had been an error of communication. The look of terror on Shelley’s face when I asked how she was going to deal with the situation was priceless. She said afterwards she thought I was going to skin her alive, but I said ‘you won’t make that mistake again’. Luckily the parents chaperoning the 7yr olds on their trip to ‘help’ at the theatre were amazing workers and got the job done.

‘At the start of my tenure I was keen to maintain the stable of programming that appealed to existing Centrepont patrons, while also attempting to push some new boundaries. We faced many challenges but each was seized as an opportunity, and we used that new energy to develop new programmes, new ways of working, new standards, and ultimately continuing the theatre’s integrity.

“Of course we didn’t always succeed: When faced with challenges that were wearing everyone down, I would take the company outside, underneath the tree, issue everyone with old Centrepont Theatre crockery and invite them to smash their frustrations away into a sturdy bucket. At other times we would take a script that we all loathed and despised and while ripping out the pages we would set them aflame. Sacrilege I know but it helped us purge some of our frustrations and anxieties.

“There are many productions that I am really proud of. But the ones that stick most in my mind are the first production, *Merchant of Venice*; *Guantanamo* - and who will ever forget the puppet rape scene from *Man of La Mancha*.

“Generally everything always managed to run incredibly smoothly, if you discount, of course, drama queens, temperamental directors and the ever ebbing tides of funding.”

As seen, one of Simon's personal favourites was the enchanting *Man of La Mancha*, created by the only man in history to come close to Shakespeare's class - Miguel Cervantes (they both died in 1616). It involved puppets and magic and was perfectly performed by Steven Ray as the Man with Regan Taylor in the delicious role of Sancho Panza. It ran for 26 nights and received lovely reviews.



Man of La Mancha 2008

Simon says: "One of my proudest moments came in 2007; the City Council was again reviewing its commitment to fund Centrepont and I was turning to leave after making my usual impassioned

speech to council. Only then did I notice the hundreds of folks in the gallery who, unbeknownst to me, had turned up to support the theatre. Partly inspired by this support, we scheduled *Lullaby Jock; silent generations*. It was about my father Jock Ferry but the only reason we began to talk about producing this one man show was that we needed a very cheap show to keep the doors open, to keep those faithful patrons flocking in." It exceeded all expectations and takes its place on the pantheon of the greats.

His legacy includes the darkroom, a back stage venue for strange late night plays. "When examining some market research we discovered very few people under the age of 30 came to theatres. The overwhelming reason was, 'That's where my nana goes'. We had made some great connections with younger people through the Basement Company (a first for NZ – described by Ferry as 'a theatre equivalent of a rugby development squad – but for school-kids who aren't necessarily good at rugby')."

From The Basement he wanted to reach out to the 18-32 year-old market. "We created the darkroom in the rehearsal space of the theatre. The audience would have to come down the dark back alley, into the grungy back theatre area, all in order to see some pretty funky late night theatre. We did all the right things, investing money in the space, creating the right atmosphere, getting the right shows, but then came our biggest gamble: we didn't tell anybody it was on! We kept it a secret. We didn't market to the public at all. We handpicked certain people that we thought would be interested, made them personal phone calls and visits, and asked them to come. We trusted on word of mouth alone and people's desire to be part of something unique. The night before the first show disastrous scenarios ran through my head, of producing everything for a new theatre, for a new show, except an audience.



The Basement Company 2006

I remember the rehearsal room as a venue for torrid matches of four-square before shows in the main theatre. (Lighting man John Lepper was the best player; Jeff KB was the most vigorous and dangerous; Alison Quigan used to cheat and KC Kelly was hopeless). Incidentally, Lepper's predecessor Stephen Lawson, "Stevie of the Lights", was the great grand-nephew of the famous Sir Douglas Lawson who trudged across Antarctica in mid-winter, in the times of Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott.

Anyway, here's an evocative list of some of the early darkroom shows: *Blinkers*, *Destination Death*, *Jane Austen Is Dead*, *A Very Special Dinner Party*, *Bang Bang You're Dead*, *Suitcase*, *Tom and Chris Secede*.

Incidentally, John Lepper (whose mother was a white witch and palm reader) was, and is, a great stand-up comic although so shy he could barely speak on stage in early days. Alison Quigan cast him in the small role of the Duke of Paris in *King Lear* which sent him into tomato-blush and went mumblously unheard every night. But he wrote (with Simon Ferry) the highly successful and recent *Stockcars* and now tells clever jokes of his own with aplomb. Anyway, his beginnings were in the dark room (*Situation Sex*) alongside exuberant William Muirhead and Nick Gibb who has gone on to win prizes and forge a notable comedic reputation for himself.

"Surprisingly", says Simon Ferry, "a good number of the people we invited fronted on the night, then we started to get calls from people asking what is the dark room, how do I get invited? And probably the greatest moment in the dark room for me was seeing two skate girls and their long boards cruising by then, seeing people hanging around outside this dark alley, they came over to see what was going on, then buying tickets. They became regulars."

That shadowy little venue down the alley became a shining beacon for dark theatre, and cracking good stuff it was. Here's opinion from the pen of almost immortal local scribe Richard Mays: "Outstanding! Gobsmacking! Fantastic!" Not bad, for something with the unpromising title of *Destination Death*. Mays continued: "Even more remarkable is that actor/writer Regan Taylor comes to this late night piece on the heels of giving a distinguished performance as Sancho Panza in the main bill show *Man of La Mancha*. *Destination Death* is exquisitely brought to life in a performance that is formidably physical, alive with humour – not all of it black – sensitive, compelling, thoughtful, tragic and wise." Richard Mays has been a fine friend of Centrepoint Theatre for many years and deserves a complimentary wine.

"Sadly towards the end of 2008 I chose to move on from Centrepoint," writes Simon. "The actual day to day running of a theatre company, the directing, casting, decision making, is not the arduous part of the job. It is the constant reinforcing that what theatre brings is important, the effort and energy it takes to stay positive in an environment that is constantly shifting and unknown. Will the work be good? Do people want this work? Will an audience come, can we pay our bills, and will we retain our funding? Can we support our personnel? And can we make art? These are the things that drain an Artistic Director, and it is important that new life is continually breathed into theatre companies to keep them alive."

Not long after, Simon retired to his wind and solar-powered farm to make butter, ice cream and beer. Even this was not rugged enough and off he set with wife Bronwyn and family for Uganda.

Simon Ferry's last theatrical engagement was my play *Gods of Warm Beer*. It did good business but Ferry could not be moved from his decision to leave. Of his resignation he said: "There's no juicy headline, I haven't fallen out with the Board, and the theatre is in good shape. I've decided to do this for positive reasons."



Vigil 2008

Simon Ferry was replaced by Kate Louise Elliott who had romped across the Centrepont stage in 1998, fresh out of Toi Whakaari. She now returned as Artistic Director. She has a lovely voice and a lovely face and a presence so charismatic that when she was killed off in Shortland Street they brought her back as her own sister. She elbows into karaoke dens and wins. She's total sass.

Taking up the job, Kate Louise had to confront an immediate crisis – a cut in the \$40,000 PN City Council contribution to the theatre. A veritable alphabet of letters from loyal supporters filled the Dear Sir page of the *Manawatu Standard*: “I am filled with horrible mixed feelings of sadness, anger and sheer incredulity when I read the Council is going to cut funding to that incomparably superb jewel, Centrepont Theatre...” (Trevor Kitson.) “For an amount of money that would barely pay the wages of one of its staff members the Council is prepared to put at risk one of the city’s few great assets...” Signed JC Gardiner. And many more. As several of the angry opponents of the funding cut averred, the theatre is “community based”. The folk of the Manawatu rallied to defend the nation’s only provincial professional theatre from persistent bureaucratic assault. Palmy really, really, really does love and cherish its theatre.

2009 began, coruscating, with SEEyD’s (creator Tim Spite) splendid presentation of *Turbine* – how things turn, down on the farm; why to be angry and why to be green.

Alas I had reached the age where I could realistically perform in Roger Hall’s *Who Wants to be 100?* I had what is called a small part – which, alas, was put on public display.



Who Wants to be 100? 2009

The year ended with a triumphant *Ladies for Hire* by Alison Quigan but just as successful had been Carl Nixon's *The Raft*. Let's take a moment to look behind the scenes of that play- from the production notes:



***The Raft* 2009**

"The fridge was discussed and Jen is happy that we can get a light into it without destroying it....Steven is after a practical over the table and the couch... There is also a need for a plug for the electric jug.



***Awahi Tapu* 2009**

"Gil said sound recording went well today and she will use it to create the monster. Shelley will suss transportation of the canoe. Shelley will look into quiet solenoids for the drip. Shelley will locate some corrugated iron...John (Lepper) will make a birds nest and dry out some leaves for the ceiling...John will look around for non-green cloth shopping bags...John will look at other beers to use. Can we

have doors that open completely? Maybe a tea trolley from a rest home? Bottle and pipe to make urinating sounds. A set of glasses for Audrey. And a G-string for Eddie?"

Such is the behind-scenes drama of your typical Centrepoint play.

Then *Awahi Tapu* by Albert Belz. Heady stuff. Just outside the menacing Ureweras (Ngapuhi, insensate police raids and the wonderful Tama Iti) stands an abandoned forestry village, Awahi Tapu. "Whoosh," begins the script, "we're flying over hills and farms and pine trees so close you can almost touch them, smell them... We close in on the village, in the middle of nowhere... Awahi Tapu... Fade in on a rusty ol' sign outside the Forestry gates – CLOSED TILL FURTHER NOTICE. There is a solitary walking figure..."

CASPER: Cliff Curtis?

SONNY: Nah.

This was also the year of the unmemorable visit of John Cleese who described PN as the suicide capital of the world. He was not in a good mood. He was, as several of his Monty Python colleagues have subsequently murmured, on tour to pay off the palimony for one, two or perhaps three of his blonde American wives.

Director Stayci Taylor wrote of the show *Hits of '74* thus: "In 1974 the Jackson Five had a hit with Dancing Machine led by 16-year-old Michael. It was the year ABBA won Eurovision, Mama Cass choked on her ham sandwich, Posh Spice was born and Christchurch hosted



Hits of 74 2009

the Commonwealth Games.” (I remember TV goddess Judy Bailey that year saying she’d been out “practicing interviewing in colour”.) The dirge “Big Norm” won gold status – and here we are at Centrepont in 2009.

The cast of *Hits* involved Lucy Schmidt; Kate Louise Elliott and Jeff Kingsford-Brown, the present Artistic Director. (Jeff first appeared at Centrepont in 1984 - as a cuckoo clock. Can you believe that? Theatre does attract curious folk).



Four Flat Whites 2010

Centrepont Board loyalist John MacFarlane resigned this year after thirty- seven - 37! - years on the Board. He had had experience of theatre himself in Christchurch at the Ngaio Marsh Theatre, which must have included Dick Nunns, Mervyn Thompson and the sadly deceased Bill Stalker. “Lead with your balls, Stalker!” roared Dame Ngaio, director of *The Tempest* in the university theatre.

John MacFarlane himself played Romeo in another Marsh-directed play.

“Centrepont has been blessed by its directors”, he said on parting. “The theatre brings money to Palmerston North and employment opportunities for people who

would otherwise have had to leave town.”

The year is 2010 and Roger trots out his annual blockbuster – *Four Flat Whites in Italy* (where, believe it or not, they make the worst coffee in Europe. Ours is much better). It stars two of our greats, Stuart Devenie and Cathy Downes. But even more importantly, Roger’s daughter Pip Hall then came up with a splendid play called *Up North* – where you went (wherever it was) when you were pregnant in the ‘50s and unmarried.

It was written “young”, you might say but was an intense and compelling work. But there is a lot of catch up for her to do to match her father.

Later in the year there was the return of a hit, inadvertently created by me when an *Aunt Daisy* tour had stalled in Christchurch on the first night of its national tour. 1500 attended, leaving no subsequent audiences and it could not be moved on. It was turned by Michael Nicholas Williams and his beautifully voiced wife Emma Kinane into a 25-

song compendium of the most arrant slosh ever to harass a human tonsil. *Pushing up Daisies*- let's hear it again without fee-ya "when they did what they did to Maria."

Then *The Cape*, by Viv Plumb and directed by Jesse Peach, fruity stuff. Set in 1994, four 18 year olds are driving from Wellington to Cape Reinga where the spirits set off for the underworld. A fine play.

And in this year Centrepoint's major sponsor BNZ pulled principal support, after 17 years, leaving the theatre's financial future uncertain. "The bank will continue to support the theatre but as a 'contributing sponsor'," it said.

Still there are always sponsors TelstraClear, EZIBUY, Property Brokers and Fitzherbert Rowe, Crombie Lockwood, and Naylor Lawrence & Associates.

Sponsors' nights are a hoot, at least afterwards when there are club sandwiches (of which you are never quite sure of the dimensions. Are you eating one or two?) and crunchy vegetal Chinese cheroot-shaped things you dunk in sauce, and little yellow savoury pies. During the show itself the packed house often sits politely through comedies, waiting for the boss to laugh so they can join in.

2011 saw the return of *Conjugal Rites* by Roger Hall, re-directed by Kate Louise Elliott starring a homebound-for-a-term Alison Quigan and Timmy Bartlett (who is, I believe, the only NZ actor who has never been anything else). It's great fun but greatest fun of all is Roger's acerbic Writer's Note which addresses the pettiness of those who resent his success.

It goes like this: "Conjugal Rites started as a would-be TV series to be called *Bed Time*.... The script was sent to TV One ... a cast was chosen and a pilot episode made but it was turned down. Realising there was material in it too good to waste I developed it into a play."

It first opened at Centrepoint with Alice Fraser and Geoffrey Heath in 1990. It went on to do very nicely thank you and then went to the UK for a season at Watford and seemed destined for the West End but got caught up in the first Bush-inspired Desert War and the Yanks stayed home, avoiding the flight to the West End in case of another Blitz. But a TV producer went to Watford and it was made into two series for Granada TV. So it all worked out. "TV One turning it down did me a big favour," glimmered Roger. "I never got round to thanking them." Roger is at his magnificent best when really pissed off.

Then Ken Duncum's eerily effective tale *Flipside* tells of upside-down love and friendship on the wave-bashed fishing boat *Rose Noelle* that floated through the South Pacific for 119 days until wrecking itself on the Great Barrier Reef.

And still on the sea, or at least on washed-up survivors; *Le Sud*, by David Armstrong, directed by Jonty Hendry, tells of 53 French sailors who got to Akaroa first and set up a south island hydroland that created the biggest electro-city in the southern hemisphere.



***Le Sud* 2011**

Brilliant idea! Reviewers of *The South* said “it’s a highly entertaining amalgam of farce and fantasy.” Farce certainly but it better stop being fantasy. The world is running out of electricity with not enough sun, wind, nucleotides, coal or oil to generate the amount needed to run the goddam internet. It has to be water. Build that hydroland southerners, or doom will be at hand without enough electricity to announce the fact.

And in September of that year, the familiar situation, described then by Artistic Director Kate Louise Elliott: “The future of the theatre could be in jeopardy; they’ve left us with a shortfall of \$80,000 and we’ve no idea how to make it up. We’ve been told we’ve done everything right and when you work so hard, something like this doesn’t make you feel very supported or valued.” The CEO of Creative NZ replied that the theatre had done everything right “but we feel like we’re paying just a little bit much for it”.

2012 savoured somewhat of a repeatment year, with the reappearance of *Michael James Manaia* and Robert Lord’s *Well Hung* which despite the presence of the divine Devenie, creaked somewhat around the edges. Devenie of course, did not. Even *The 39 Steps* was a sort of return with Ross Gumbley returning us to John Buchan’s famous novel. In his writer’s notes Gumbley said: “When I read an item in the newspaper that for security reasons international airlines were now recording the types of meal each passenger ordered I knew I wanted to adapt (*39 Steps*). I felt the paranoia of our own time reflected the paranoia of Buchan’s time (1915)...”



***39 Steps* 2011**

Buchan wrote the book while convalescing (unsuccessfully) from duodenal ulceration. His six-year-old daughter on a visit to his sanatorium counted the staircase. “There are 39 steps” she told him.

The year also featured *At The Wake*, starring a fag-smoking, Johnny Walker-swilling grandmother who has been compared to the late Joan Rivers (without the facial surgery). Author Victor Roger was inspired into ink by the thought – “what if my Samoan father, my Scottish grandmother and I were at the same funeral?” Well, here was the result and it was very (inappropriately) funny.

Then the popular world premier of Roger Hall’s *You Can Always Hand Them Back* filled with “little pleasures and smelly surprises”. The show was sponsored by Ezibuy who perhaps should sell nappies by the palette.

It was also a wonderful year for celebrity. In March Sir Ian McKellen wandered across the Centrepoint stage for a night, answering questions from the audience. “I don’t make much distinction between being a stand-up comic and acting Shakespeare; in fact unless you’re a good comedian you’re never going to be Hamlet. I was brought up in industrial South Lancashire, down the cobbled streets from where LS Lowry (1887-1976) lived and painted. I’m only an actor, I’m not a writer. I’m not going to leave a legacy. All I’ve ever done is learn lines and say them.” Perhaps a sad thing to admit – but check the facts behind the remark: What do we now know of Richard Burton “greatest actor ever born” except that he was married to Elizabeth Taylor? And Richard Harris, (who?), Alec Guinness, Ralph Richardson? Good god – Laurence Olivier?

While playing *Waiting For Godot* in Wellington, Sir Ian went for a stroll and a smoke in his bowler-hatted ensemble – and someone dropped a \$1 coin into it. He had been working to refund the earthquake-smitten Court Theatre in Christchurch – presumably the \$1 went into the jar.

In February of that year Kate Louise resigned. Here’s Kate Louise, in her own words, on her journey as Artistic Director of Centrepoint:

“While Simon Ferry had begun a huge amount of work behind the scenes on the strategic structure of the business, the audience had waned. Simon had the hardest task; he took over from the much-adored Alison Quigan and a ‘new vision’ was expected. Simon is the most trusted actor in the industry. He is also extremely smart and knew a lot of groundwork was required to build the business. He invested a great deal in getting the board and staff to work for a common goal and set a strategy.

“I, of course, waltzed in with big ideas but no idea. I was a Centrepoint baby, and proud of it,” says Kate Louise. “I had been hired straight from graduating Toi Whakaari in 1998 as an actor, and stayed for about three years, coming back periodically over the next six years. I actually applied for the position because my partner at the said, “If you don’t apply, I don’t want to hear you bitching that some other monkey is stuffing it up.”

“I did get an interview, and what struck me, and became a fundamental part of my job (once I got it) was this: When I got a taxi at Palmerston North International Airport and

asked to go to Centrepunt theatre, the taxi driver said 'Where's that now?' If the taxi drivers don't even know where or what the theatre is, the ONLY professional theatre that exists outside of what the rest of the country calls the main centres, what the...? I resolved to change that.

"On my second day in the job I received a notice from Creative New Zealand saying our audience numbers were critically low and if they didn't hit 9000 by the end of the year our doors would close (they were at 7000). We also had an extra large negative working capital deficit. This was no longer a comedy. Decisions had to be made.

"I looked at what had sold in the last ten years, and began to programme accordingly. We needed to form realistic budgets and stick to them. Julie Barnes is a star here; she is exceptional at 'budget foresight' and she taught me about true cost. Julie's loyalty to Centrepunt won her the award for 'Best Longstanding Staff Member' in the 2010 Manawatu Business Awards. She is one of several excellent staff members, too many to name, who worked hard with me to help restore the theatre's fortunes.



Dead Tragic 2010

"The truth is that whatever I thought was going to be amazing, we had to pay for it. It didn't matter to the audience if there were 16 people on stage or four, but it *did* matter to our budget. I knew we needed certain shows, Julie knew we had needs. We developed a formula, and then settled on a programme that would work both artistically and financially. I also made some cuts.

"I was still very aware that we needed to get out into the community - we needed to be visible. My father would consistently remind me, 'It isn't good enough to be excellent, that excellence must be visible in the community for it to be effective'.

I had to look at where our resources were being drained without a reasonable excuse for debt. The darkroom was a risk to the core business, although an exciting and welcomed initiative in the community; we were under resourced to sustain both main stage and the darkroom. I made the bold and publicly un-liked move of putting the darkroom 'on hold' until the main stage and our core business reached a healthier state.

"I began to programme to a crowd we had lost, and we stopped begging people to support us. Instead, we told them we were an asset. I called in acting favours from all over the country. We had a TV-watching audience and we needed to remind them that they used to be theatre-going. We also wanted to let theatre virgins know they had an alternative - we just hadn't let them know it.

"There were Centrepoint t-shirts (goodbye awful green waistcoats), an ad that played in the cinemas before the movies (filmed by Billy T winner Nick Gibb), massive posters in the Plaza, a regular radio spot - we did everything. I enjoyed my meetings with CNZ and the PNCC later that year. I told them we had not 'met' their expected target of 9000 people through the doors: We had exceeded it. We were up to 15,000 and we still had the Christmas show to go (and that was already booked out).

We didn't extend the season and this taught the audience to pre-book - nobody wanted to miss out.

"I programmed an all New Zealand season, with a Roger Hall to start. Some said it was risky (the Board did, the staff did). But the stats show that it worked. In the four years I programmed, there was only one play that was not a Kiwi play. I also did my best to programme a Roger Hall every year. The man is a genius: he speaks to the people, and they respond. Why reinvent the Big Mac?

"We were encouraged to collaborate with other theatres. Ross Jolly (Circa Theatre, Wellington) and I tried really hard to collaborate with plays but with two different theatre spaces with different requirements, accommodation and travel costs - it simply didn't work. Circa did collaborate with us in other ways, sharing pieces of set and lending us the incomparable set constructor Ian Cooper when we were in a bind.

"The Manawatu business community is incredibly proud of Centrepoint Theatre. They understand its worth and get behind it. At one time, a local beauty business gave us products to welcome out-of-town practitioners, complete with complimentary Brazilians. We got some welcome deals from local hotels for our visiting practitioners.

"I made a great friend and found real support in board member Anne Hancock, and was sad when she left the Board - although happy for her future. She had been a part of the theatre for most of its life. She cared about the people and respected what we were doing. I don't think anyone could count how many cakes she made for people. Anne was a straight shooter; she dissolved bullshit and understood passion.

“I was lucky to work with set designers who are magicians. The audience doesn’t see what is actually backstage - we would rehearse with water running down the walls. On stage you saw a bedroom become an upturned Rose Noelle, and believed it, a beautiful master bedroom of an old villa (Nicole Cosgrove), a church hall complete with mobile car made entirely of number 8 wire (Bruce Graham), the incredible cabin by the lake in the raft, with the forest of ‘poles’ (Dion Boothby and Jen Lal, lights) or my personal favourites: the farmhouse in *Up North* and the *Hits of ’74* set, (Sean Coyle). Brian King brought with him a masterful set design for *Awhi Tapu* that the cast deconstructed through the story, absolute genius symmetry between set design, script, actors and direction.

“We were equally blessed with countless superior lighting designs from the incomparable Jen Lal. Graham Slater was my reliable LX genius and, when I could get him, Nathan McKendry gave me reason to break out with “You... light up my life”.

“John Lepper remains the best operator I have ever worked with. John can re-programme a show (while the show is running and something inexplicably intergalactic has gone wrong causing the lighting board to DIE and lose every lighting state previously saved). He can sense a cue, an actor skipping a scene (which sends a programmed show completely out) and as you are waiting backstage freaking out and wondering if you should go on or not, he lets you know he has it sorted. John Lepper is also a Centrepoint baby - now adult - an incredibly talented gentleman. (But a warning: do not play poker with this man and expect to win).

“The Basement Company, for young up-and-coming actors, was an excellent initiative of Simon Ferry and Shelly Irwin. It became increasingly difficult to find suitable shows for a group of teenagers but in 2011 we were lucky enough to get Mitch Tawhi Thomas, an award-winning playwright, actor and tutor to work alongside the Basement Company for a year and mentor them into writing their own show. This was really special, for the company, for us, and for New Zealand theatre.

“We also held the first Centrepoint Summer School in 2009. Thirty or so kids spent an intensive week at the theatre, getting a taste of stunt fighting, monologue work, acting for camera etc. With the help of Kane Parsons (aka Elvis in Jim Morrison clothing) we worked with talented kids who did more to recharge our batteries than five Beroccas in a can of Red Bull. They performed a showcase at the end of the week to family and friends. It was a highlight of my time as AD to meet a new group of enthusiastic Centrepoint babies who were going to own their theatre, and expand our family.

“It was my job to bring the rest of the country to the Manawatu, and show them there is a theatre in the bottom half of the North Island where the audience are real. They will tell you if they like it. They don’t hide. They understand comedy, and, boy, you’d better be good. Alison Quigan taught me about playing to an audience: “Yeah, be big, but don’t be a caricature – if the audience don’t believe you, they’ll tell you”. They wanted the



Penalties, Pints and Pirouettes 2011

pantomime they had come to know – ‘their pantomime’ that AQ, Ross Gumbley and Lucy Schmidt had delivered, under AQ. It was clever, it was local. It was re-telling their own history. Of course it was going to work. (Hence *Ladies for Hire* – Alison Quigan, and *Hits of 74, Hits of ‘83* – Lucy Schmidt and Stayci Taylor, and the adaptation of *The 39 Steps* by Ross Gumbley).

“They also wanted drama, ‘*Up North*’ from Pip Hall was real, relevant, and my biggest challenge as an actor. Other notable and exceptional dramas during my time as AD are covered elsewhere in this history.

“We went through a lot in the four years I programmed, supported by an excellent team. I’m not sure whether it is a coup to do well in a recession for a theatre like Centrepont. People still go out - they just go locally instead of spending big overseas. It was a coup to be able to secure new partnering sponsors, Property Brokers and Fitzherbert Rowe. We needed their help. By that stage, the building was haemorrhaging. We had more people attending shows and the foyer wasn’t big enough to accommodate them. The backstage area was still leaking and we had only one shower directly in the middle of the two dressing rooms (Jeff KB, you do realise you were attempting to cover yourself with a hand towel, and you were holding it under your chin?).

“Being the Artistic Director of a theatre is tricky. There isn’t a course in New Zealand where you can learn how to do it. You think you can do whatever you want, but of course you can’t. You can’t hire everyone, you can’t programme what you want - just as in life, you have to pay the bills, you have to make an income, you have to keep your family satisfied, and you have to get really good at saying ‘No’, without making enemies or crushing dreams. You have to deal with valid questions like, ‘Why should Centrepont get funding over the Hospice?’

“I did meet a lady one night after *Hits of '83* who made a bee line for me in the foyer. She said to me, ‘You deserve to be funded. We are sheep farmers from Dargaville and my husband hasn’t laughed in three years. Tonight, he laughed. You saved our lives’. That comment has stuck with me.

“We have a place,” says Kate Louise. “We put the colour in the world. I am extremely proud to have been a part of this unique and loved theatre. I am extremely proud to have been part of a dynamic, hardworking and dedicated team. I am very proud to have had amazing theatre practitioners get a taste of just how special this theatre is. This little engine that could - actually kicks big butt!”



Hits of '83 2011

Jeff Kingsford-Brown was appointed as Centrepoint Theatre’s ninth Artistic Director in early 2013. Like Simon Ferry before him, he was stepping into big shoes. During Kate Louise’s tenure she presided over a string of hits plays. Nine of them did more than 80% business and seven exceeded 90%, a stunning record. For audiences, she also remains one of the best loved performers to have appeared on the Centrepoint stage.

2013: *Manawa*, by Jamie McCaskill. Jimmy King (played by the play writer himself) is our youngest-ever murderers and wants to get into the prestigious Mt Eden prison because they have a pool table. Samoan stooge Mau Viaga (in NZ for only five months) has been charged with eating a kakapo. A self-seeking lawyer played by Ms Kali Kopae represents them both. It’s a situation as explosively emotional as pickled onions.

This play and a myriad others is an affirmation that writing for the stage in New Zealand is worthwhile and provides a worthwhile project, especially when elementally assisted by the professional attentions of Centrepoint Theatre.

The last play of the last year before the 40th anniversary of Centrepoint Theatre had been the practical, mechanical and enormously popular *Stockcars: the Musical* written by John Lepper and Simon Ferry. Music was by local institution Dean Parkinson and the production starred Jeff KB (Artistic Director) whose character Malcolm duFresne won the Finals many years ago by nefarious means, bunting his super-rival Cameron Todd (Mark Clare of *Ladies Night* fame) off the track, causing an injury to him that brings his



Stockcars 2013

career to an end. Cut to 2013 when naughty but risingly popular councillor (still Jeff KB) wants to shut down the speedway at the expense of the man he once injured.

It hit familiar chords for many Manawatu punters; it ran for 36 performances and was brought back for a return season in 2014, the year of the 40th anniversary.

Mid 2013 and theatre-goers are once again enticed to 'come over to the dark side of Centrepoint Theatre' with the long wished for re-opening of the darkroom. Across the road from its mother ship, the intimate 50 seat venue has become the home of The Basement Company and the 'black box' theatre for touring shows and one-off performances of plays, improv, comedy, music, dance and film.



The Darkroom 2013

Which brings us to one of the last works to be featured in this narrative. *The War Artist* featured three blokes: Sergeant Price (Owen Black) and Private Mitchell (Simon Leary) who are burying four dead comrades under a rare oak near no-man's-land. And they do, in the middle of the stage! They argue as they dig, over the virtues and horrors of war. Enter the war artist (Tom Trevella). Directed by Steven Ray it's a resounding play with an ending as beautiful as that in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (which could have been happening at the same time). Writer Carl Nixon has certainly come a long, long way from *Kiwifruits*. Which, alas, will probably still have done better business.

From there the year veered into the *Kings of the Gym*, by David Armstrong, (where PE is pitted against PI), *The Mercy Clause* (is killing mercy or not?) *Hound of the Baskervilles* (not, to my astonishment adapted by Ross Gumbley). In November, when Centrepoint started 40 years previously, the anniversary will be celebrated by the wondrously titled Christmas show, *The Pink Hammer* by Michele Amas.



The Hounds of the Baskerville 2014

David Geary: “I was lucky to be working in a time when things were turning round so numbers of directors, actors, theatres and audiences were keen to seek out and promote truly original Aotearoa New Zealand work. I am amazed at the width, depth and wealth of Kiwi performing arts. I think Centrepoint Theatre can be proud to have led the way.”

And the last appearance is by incumbent Artistic Director Jeff Kingsford-Brown who, we recall, has been associated with the theatre since 1984 as a cuckoo clock in the children’s play *The Gingerbread Man* by Gillian Shaw. In that first stint with Centrepoint he also stage managed the production of *Hot Water* by Roger Hall. During his 30 year association with Centrepoint, Jeff has appeared in 33 productions and has directed twelve.



Centrepoin 2010

In the role of AD, he says “as ever, the greatest challenge is funding the theatre.” In this he says he is helped by a theatre that is “well administered and well run by good staff.”

Jeff also appreciates the support of the Centrepoint Board. “The relationship between a board and a theatre’s management can be tricky at times and there are moments in Centrepoint’s 40 year history that reflect this (and the artistic temperament of directors). The business of running a theatre can come into collision with artistic aspirations. However our present board understands that the essential divide between management and governance must be in place for any organisation to be effective and efficient.”

And the future? Jeff says Centrepoint truly belongs to the community and the plays that are staged reflect this. “We want to continue to be a vibrant, accessible, populist (in the best possible way), relevant theatre that fosters young talent and serves and reflects our loyal local community.

“We are counting on that loyalty from the people of the Manawatu to ensure we have a successful future. People value Centrepoint and understand that its status as a professional theatre means they get the very best actors, playwrights, directors that New Zealand has to offer. Long may it be so.”

Disclaimer: We have consulted many people while assembling this history of Centrepoint and, in many cases, have relied on their memories of events. However memories are often not perfect. If you have a fact you feel needs correcting, please email us at julie@centrepoint.co.nz