

**Theatre, culture and community. A review of
*Downstage Upfront. The first 40 years of New Zealand's
 longest-running professional theatre. By John Smythe.*
 Victoria University Press, 2004.**

A Review Article by Roger Robinson

I read *Downstage Upfront* in New York City, immersing myself in the story of what was for many years the lone professional theatre in a small community, while living in a huge community that has literally hundreds of professional theatres. In the weeks it took to move pleasurably through John Smythe's 500-page narrative, I saw plays that ranged from the luridly high-tech 42nd Street tourist extravaganza *The Lion King*, through a brilliant dramatization of *Finnegans Wake* in a dingy loft off 10th Avenue, an evening of five new one-acters in a new theatre dedicated to work by women playwrights, and the gay tragedy *Paris Letter*, to a minimal-budget *Twelfth Night* in a fetidly hot West Side church with an audience of five (three after the interval – including me, for I couldn't walk out on a production whose Malvolio was a dead ringer for Rob Muldoon).

You could go to the theatre every night in New York and still not see half of what is on offer. But the big-city/small town contrast is less clear-cut than it might seem. Some Off and Off-off Broadway venues would make the Star Boating Club or the old Harris Street Circa look lavishly appointed. I saw an inventive *Pericles* in a pokey basement in the Village that set us shuddering in our seats every few minutes when a subway train thundered past on the other side of a thin wall. In New York, as in Wellington, theatre is hard, dedicated work in usually unprepossessing conditions, for poor pay, demanding employers, and critical audiences, and with absolutely no guarantees, financial or otherwise. Most of the small New York groups I've supported would look with envy at the facilities and relatively loyal audiences enjoyed by Downstage and Circa. In one grimy venue (I was there for *All's Well*) young actors were swabbing out the audience men's room before going on.

I open with this digression in order to make a central point. No account of New York's cultural life could omit its theatres. That has been true for over 100 years, and is still true. Even in this age when we're assaulted by entertainment options that are more accessible, instant, and high-tech, theatres have kept an important cultural place. Yes, they still offer the same primitive entertainment of a few people walking about and talking in front of a lot of people who have to sit still and not talk. Yet however lumbering that

process seems, it manages to stay on the beat of the changing pulse of culture. Theatres remain essential to the lifeblood of thought, ideas and discourse by which vigorous communities live. Perhaps they win that place simply because it takes some effort to attend, or because their entertainment is live, or their experience communal, or because their long tradition raises expectations – I don't know.

In New York, that process derives from fifty or more professional dramas available at any one time. In Wellington, the capital city of a culturally developed nation, Downstage carried that mighty responsibility alone for thirteen years. Then Circa was created from its rib, as its helpmeet, complement, and contender, and now shares the work, as do Taki Rua and Bats on a much smaller scale. But that still only makes four, at best. Whatever your views on the current theatre scene in Wellington and New Zealand more widely, the historical achievement of Downstage is irrefutable. It was Downstage that took the initiative, laid down the policies, and won the audiences. It was Downstage that created locally-based professional theatre, sustained it, and made it essential to the community's culture. It carried that weight alone for thirteen years. A pity Downstage has never yet produced *Coriolanus*, or it could say, Alone I did it.

Put it this way. If you see a poor production in New York you simply forget it by going to something better two nights later. Your friends will usually have seen different plays. You accept that you simply can't see everything significant. In Wellington, each production is a talking point for weeks, and becomes part of the city's permanent record – as this book vividly shows. We care more than New Yorkers care who's in and who's out. Directors come and go in smaller New York companies like English soccer managers, and nobody outside notices. But in Wellington, the wounds of some appointments and departures are still bleeding publicly decades later.

Only imagine Wellington in the 1970s and 1980s if the Downstage experiment had foundered. Having moved to the city in 1975, I can attest personally to Downstage's importance to one life here (and I have never sought to be more than an obscure member of the audience, so have no vested interest). The 1970s, especially the last years of the decade, were a cultural spring in Wellington, and Downstage was a flourishing centre of that growth. Productions like Colin McColl's of Brian McNeill's *The Two Tigers*, Mervyn Thompson's of *Equus*, *Songs to Uncle Scrim* and *Three Sisters*, and Anthony Taylor's of *Travesties* seemed to affirm, with new Wellington books like Lauris Edmond's *In Middle Air*, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's *Kapiti*, Ian Wedde's *Earthly* or Maurice Gee's *Plumb*, that we were living in a true cultural capital. In retrospect they are all milestones in a remarkable era of development.

In the 1980s, though there was less sense of breaking new ground, Downstage achieved the equally important task of consolidating what had been gained, sustaining a professional quality that would have done any company theatre in the world proud. It's even more difficult to pick a few, so again I excuse my choice as partly personal: Phillip Mann's productions of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Life of Galileo* and Greg McGee's *Tooth and Claw*; George Webby's of Renée's *Wednesday to Come*; and the vintage era of Colin McColl, with, among much else, *Happy End*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Threepenny Opera* and (at the onset of the 1990s) *Hedda Gabler*. That unforgettable production, still the best Ibsen I have seen anywhere in the world, is the one deservedly chosen for John Smythe's front cover. (An alternative explanation for this choice could perhaps be that the image of Catherine Wilkin dandling her revolver is apt for a theatre that was about to try to blow its own brains out.)

Which brings me to the book. Books about theatres are usually not much more than glorified souvenir programmes. Their appeal is essentially nostalgic. Smythe has chosen to write something much more substantial, a genuine history, setting himself the unenviable task of telling the story of all the complex and often conflicting components of theatre – plans, bookings and cancellations, managing boards, artistic directors, actors, lights, sound, costumes, front of house, box office, audiences, reviews, cash-flow, cats, and much more. His book is basically a compelling narrative, production by production, director by director. The choice of play and stories behind each production, the making of each drama, the response of the reviewers, the real people who made Downstage their work, the percentage of seats sold in each season, these are the things at centre stage, for these are the reality of a medium whose business is unreality. Smythe's narrative remains interesting even when you missed a particular production. When it deals with those that you saw and still remember, it's positively gripping.

Excellent as narrative history, Smythe's story does not go a lot beyond. He lets the meaning of the story largely speak for itself. With kiwi modesty and kiwi taciturnity, he never trumpets the theatre's creative achievements, until a two-page epilogue. The kind of argument about communal culture that I sketched above is not part of the book's scope. That is not a weakness, but it does leave room for some later, more interpretatively ambitious analysis of what Downstage did to change New Zealand's thinking about the arts – our thinking about New Zealand drama, to start with.

Nor does Smythe speculate about Downstage's contribution to the phenomenon (for that is what it is) of Wellington's transformation since 1963 from a dingy and culturally irrelevant public-service puddle into a hotbed of varied and vigorous culture with a global reputation. It could be argued that

Downstage initiated and led that transformation. Let's just settle for a significant role, and await the book that analyses and affirms how it happened, and what it means.

So Smythe gives us a story, not an analysis. And it's great reading – a rattling good yarn of thespian adventures, full of heroes and villains and unruly crews, voyages into the unknown, storms and near-wrecks, fight scenes and mutinies, mad domineering skippers, hated ones forced to walk the plank, and hordes of one-eyed accountants swarming up the rigging with calculators between their teeth. The book is a lively and often delightful chronicle of the colourful life (and death-defying escapes) of a fine theatre. To put it seriously, the narrative is a remarkable achievement in reconstructing, in such telling detail, events within what is, after all, a closed institution.

It is even more remarkable in the calm lucidity with which it summarizes the many debates and arguments and punch-ups that have inevitably scarred the theatre's history. These are matters that, by the very nature of the people who work in theatre, were even at the time subject to histrionically rival interpretations. Smythe remains as objective and judicious as it is possible to be. If he tends sometimes to seem too discreet, too oblique (on the egregious censorship of Mervyn Thompson in 1984, for instance), that is in consequence of what seems a considered policy of eschewing the passionate hyperboles that enliven and bedevil most discourse about theatre.

Smythe is excellent on many phases of Downstage's story – so excellent, that I must be very selective. He is excellent on its origins, the creation of four talented and versatile men in that era when creative kiwi initiative was beginning to turn New Zealand's pasty cultural fifties into its pulsating seventies. Martyn Sanderson, Tim Elliott, Peter Bland and Harry Serensin - their story would make a great four-hander play, and Smythe tells it with insight and vigour. He is excellent also on the upsurge in the theatre's commercial success and artistic importance under Mervyn Thompson, who probably more and certainly earlier than any other Downstage director understood what cultural vitality means and how the drama can promote it.

He is excellent on the vintage period under Colin McColl, and on the crisis that followed in the early 1990s, when the new official state religion of worship of the bottom line nearly killed the theatre's spirit. He taught me a lot about the detailed financial realities of a theatre, and the policy pressures that can be applied by funding bodies supposedly serving the public interest.

He tells many good small stories, too, without ever resorting to insider thespian gossip. His anecdotes remind us (the audience) of those theatre moments that we all remember with most gleeful affection – ironically, moments when things went wrong, and we were reminded that we were witnessing a risky live performance. Peter Bland falls down a hole and breaks

his crown, an unscripted Wellington policeman's helmet rises demonically through the stage, a drunk or poisoned rat turns Hamlet's killing of Polonius into high comedy, French revolutionaries clash with the audience and bottles and ribs get broken, cats walk on and off as theatre cats always do, actors perform brilliantly and behave badly, lines are forgotten and invented. And so on. It's a page turner.

Smythe gives us great riches, and it is ungrateful to mention gaps. But it is the reviewer's job. I'd like to see more space and credit given to the work of the selfless supporters and volunteers who sustain such a theatre and who have sometimes literally kept it alive – from politicians like Alan Highett to donors and volunteers like Constance Scott Kirkcaldie. They are more than important in the story of a theatre's relation to its community. I'd like to see more recognition of the special relationship between this theatre and the university, one that has been sustained and creative (in the 1970s it gave Downstage informed and lasting audiences as well as board members as good as Don McKenzie and directors as good as Phillip Mann). I'd like to see more attention to the case for making Downstage a national theatre, as the discussion will rise again sooner or later. And I'd like to see more writing about drama as resonant, intelligent, and vital as some passages that are quoted here from Bruce Mason and Mervyn Thompson.

I have very few complaints, considering what an ambitious and complex task this book is. One is that it relies too heavily on inadequate reviews (Bruce Mason's the shining exception). In discussing the various crises and public debates about theatre, Smythe also resorts too often to citing at length feeble thinking and worse writing from self-appointed experts, especially on *City Voice*. And there is an ill judged jab at the 1988 Katherine Mansfield centennial celebrations, which in fact were successful for international literary scholarship as well as local culture. If Wellington's main theatre couldn't make a buck out of the centenary of the city's greatest writer, it has only itself to blame. Smythe quotes an uninformed sneer of the kind that he scrupulously avoids about theatre.

In almost every other way this is the best history of a theatre that I've read. It is engagingly written, scrupulously researched, enthrallingly informative, very well indexed, pleasingly designed, and amply and vividly illustrated. For, to adapt Alice in Wonderland, what's the use of a theatre book without pictures in it? Theatre, after all, means Seeing Place.

Best of all, at the back of the book there is a comprehensive and detailed list of every Downstage production and event. That is alone worth the price. It is an archival resource that makes this book indispensable for any future work on New Zealand theatre, as well as irresistible dipping for Downstage fans.

And it is irresistible. Theatre would seem to be among the most ephemeral of art forms – as transient as cake making. By definition each performance is unique, each production irrecoverable. Yet perversely we find ourselves compelled to try to recall the best of them from the recesses of memory. I'm not an extreme theatre obsessive, but I keep and browse old programmes, good reviews, sometimes even ticket stubs (which I used to muse over surreptitiously during particularly tedious university committee meetings). John Smythe, as I have said, has made this book substantial and informative, much more than nostalgia. But there is still nostalgia in it, as there should be. For those who have lived for any time in Wellington since 1964, Downstage has been part of the formation of our minds, and of our community. This book helps to remind us how, and gives new life to the memories.