For Love of Appin and The Voice of the People by Alan E. Mulgan, in production 90 years on

Abstract

This article is a description of student work inspired by academic research by Professor Janinka Greenwood’s into the plays of Alan E. Mulgan, A Slice of Theatre Archaeology: Mulgan’s For Love of Appin and Other Plays, as published in the Online New Zealand Journal of Research in Performing Arts and Education, 2010. Greenwood’s research highlighted the fact that these plays, which give an insight into New Zealand’s past, may never be performed again. As the Head of Drama at an Auckland Secondary college I introduced the plays to a Level 3 NCEA drama class. The class had been exploring stories of New Zealand and was excited by the plays and the possibility of being the first to use the material in many years; the students set out to bring them to life once more. After weeks of planning and rehearsal, For Love of Appin and The Voice of the People were performed to audiences in the old schoolroom at the Howick Historical Village, Auckland on the Village’s ‘live day’. The purpose of this article is to recall the memory of that busy term, the journey the students took and to demonstrate how academic research can inspire teachers within the drama classroom.

Introduction

In 2010, Professor Janinka Greenwood published a fascinating insight into the ways in which New Zealand plays can speak to us today of past times[1]. I was particularly interested as I had purchased the book, Three Plays of New Zealand by Alan E. Mulgan a few years previously. It had sat collecting dust on my bookshelf. Greenwood felt that these plays might no longer speak to an audience today and, “may appear lustreless and uninteresting to casual readers. (They would need to be readers as it is unlikely the play would now be seen in live production)” (Greenwood, 2010). Even in 1922 the plays were described as, “more suitable for reading than acting” (The Bookman, 1922).

I decided to re-read the three plays, For Love of Appin, The Daughter, and The Voice of the People. As I blew the dust off the little tome I began to wonder whether they could see the light of day once more in performance. As an insight into New Zealand’s past they were appealing, but could they still work as pieces of theatre? The themes challenged, “current conceptualisations of place, identity and understandings of what it means to be a New Zealander” (Greenwood, 2010). John Thomson felt the themes surrounded, “loneliness and cultural isolation” (Thomson, 1984, p. 37). These themes supported the work that I had been undertaking at an Auckland school.
Level 3 Drama

As a Head of Drama I was teaching a small group of NCEA Level 3 drama students. The theme chosen for the year was journeys to a new land, which had been inspired by a play the students were to see later in the year. The play, *On the Upside-Down of the World*, written by Arthur Meek and performed by The Auckland Theatre Company, was a new play based on the diaries of Ann Martin. It concerned the development of a Pakeha identity in colonial New Zealand. As part of their NCEA Drama studies students are expected to, “Research, analyse, and critically evaluate how drama, including New Zealand drama, interprets, records, or challenges social and cultural discourse” (*New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007*).

The students had spent a term exploring the work of Brecht and devising solo pieces based on their own stories of journeys to a new land. One Maori student had researched what the coming of the Pakeha had meant to his people and presented his story through a selection of Maori performance conventions. Other stories from South Africa, Fiji, Samoa and Afghanistan told of the struggle of women, cultural misunderstandings, and the ways in which the students had come to identify with their new home. It appeared that the themes of the Mulgan plays, the difficulties of settling in a new land, the role of women and identity, felt like they belonged in the year’s programme. I wondered whether these plays could become the focus of our next production. Could the dialogue, themes and style engage the students while challenging them to make discoveries about New Zealand’s past? As Burgess and Gaudry state in their discussion about school productions, “the roles in the script should be challenging enough so that the student can experience new human perspectives rather than merely reproducing things already known” (*Burgess & Gaudry, 1986*).

A significant production

I decided to offer the students these plays for their next Achievement Standard which requires them to perform a role within a significant production. Throughout the process they are expected to research their play, participate actively in the rehearsals and keep a portfolio which shows a developing understanding of their role (*New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2005*). The performance must be presented to an audience other than the class. A significant production is determined to be, “one that has sufficient depth and length, or that is extensive and important enough to merit attention, or with an established critical reputation” (*New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2005*). Alan Mulgan was a respected writer in his time. Peter Harcourt described him as, “not just another hopeful scribbler but an established author – a recognised literary figure” (*Harcourt, 1978, p. 18*). The original performance of *For Love of Appin* in 1920 was described as having, “proved to have literary merit of no mean degree, while the character drawing was excellent” (1978, p. 18). Professor Shelley had written the introductory comments to the play in 1922 when he was the Professor of Education at Canterbury University. Harcourt devotes eight pages of commentary and analysis to the three plays. He states that *For Love of Appin*, “deserves to be remembered as the play which marked a turning point in our development as a country with a theatre of its own” (1978, p. 30). In 2010, the plays had once more come to the fore through Greenwood’s research.
The theatrical approach

Greenwood states that, “the dominant theatrical philosophy of this time was one of realistic naturalism” (Greenwood, 2010) and that audiences,

…are unlikely to be excited by the form of For Love of Appin. It is dialogue dominated and, therefore, reads like a scripted short story. There is little physicality or manipulation of the elements of space, time, role, light, sound or set (Greenwood, 2010).

These plays would require a more realistic approach than the students had experienced. They would provide a contrast to their Brechtian work and allow them to get to grips with characters and language. At the 2011 New Zealand drama conference I had the opportunity to speak briefly with Professor Greenwood, who made some valuable suggestions concerning two possible approaches to the play. One was as a “talking heads” and the other, to use the history of the era to surround the performance through projected images.

Researching the plays

The students began their work, not by reading the plays but by exploring a projected image of an old abandoned New Zealand farmhouse. They imagined the people who might have lived there and what their lives were like. They focused on an evening meal and re-enacted the imagined rituals. The students began to share their knowledge of a bygone era gained from history lessons, and the media. One student shared her own regular family ritual of meal times and discussions centred about the different roles of men and women. The students were then asked to imagine what their lives might have been like in New Zealand in the 1920s.

The class then read the plays aloud together. After the first reading there was a level of excitement about two of the plays. The students felt that, For Love of Appin and The Voice of the People had more of a tangible conflict and strong characters that they could imagine performing. Once the students had decided they wanted to work with the material, I constructed the Achievement Standard task.

A debate about roles took place with students having strong opinions about who they wanted to play. Once the roles had been chosen, students undertook research into the era making interesting discoveries about life in New Zealand in the 1920’s. Of particular interest to the girls was the role of women. Photographic Images from the era continued to provide a useful source of information dress, manners and society throughout the process.

Rehearsing the plays

As the students began their rehearsals they imagined the backstory of the characters. In For Love of Appin, all the students were interested in the argument that ensues between Angus Buchan and the Stranger. These two characters had known each other in Scotland but as they meet once more in New Zealand, Buchan, “seizes him by the throat; Mrs. Buchan darts forward between them and grasps her husband’s arm” (Mulgan, 1922, p. 18).
In pairs the students improvised the argument that they believed might have taken place in Scotland. An enthusiastic dialogue began about the situation and how it might have affected the lives of the Stranger, Buchan and his wife. In *The Voice of the People*, the students researched the history of women and their entrance into parliament. The students also explored the language within the play, discovering new words and using the rhythms and dialect in the dialogue to help them find the vocal quality of the characters.

**Stage directions**

The stage directions in each play are highly detailed. In *For Love of Appin*, approximately twelve sentences are used to evoke the kitchen-living room of a, “small farmhouse in the back-blocks of New Zealand” (1922) and include, “at the right hand side is a stove, standing out from the wall, and on it is a boiling kettle” (Mulgan, 1922). In *The Voice of the People*, Mulgan describes both the physical and psychological aspects of characters. The stage directions seem to address the audience directly as when he describes Miss Rachel Bromley, “Miss Rachel is a woman of forty five, who keeps house for her brother George and worships him. She – but when you see George you will be able to judge her better” (Mulgan, 1922, p. 53). The students enjoyed the detail and formality of the language and decided to include the stage directions as a spoken narration in the manner of Brecht. In each play, one of the students took on the role of narrator breaking the fourth wall between audience and stage using Mulgan’s elaborate stage directions as a commentary on the action.

There is much potential for stage business in both plays. In *For Love of Appin* Mrs. Buchan entertains visitors, irons, makes tea and steps in to break up the fight between her husband and the Stranger. In *The Voice of the People* a status game is played out between Beatrice Galbraith and Bromley which informed the blocking. The student playing the character of Bromley decided he was socially inept and a product of his time rather than deliberately dismissive of women. This informed both his movement and use of space.

**Performing the Plays**

An opportunity arose to perform the plays at the Howick Historical Village on a ‘live day’. A live day occurs once a month when members of the Howick Historical Village take on roles to bring the village alive with authentic activities. The village is a living museum in Auckland which brings together several buildings and artefacts to tell the story of the Fencible history in New Zealand. It was felt that this would provide an authentic opportunity for the students to perform to a public audience. The performance was to take place in an old wooden building from the 19th century which was once a schoolhouse. This location allowed the students to surround the play in the artefacts of the bygone era, as Professor Greenwood had suggested.

The students chose to perform *The Voice of the People* first and end with *For Love of Appin*. They felt the comedy would relax the audience while the serious play would leave them thinking. It was not known whether visitors would take time to sit and watch each play. The plays were performed in the morning and again later in the day to full houses and the audience appeared to engage with the material. Several members of the audience wore costumes because of their roles in the live day and this combined with the presence of
museum artefacts in the space created a sense of stepping back in time. Aside from the video camera filming the performance, as required by NCEA, there was little else of the modern world which imposed upon the play. At moments the plays seemed to be a bridge between the early settlers and modern day immigrants, the story of settling in a new land shared by many. At the first performance of _For Love of Appin_ as Buchan and the Stranger recalled their days in Scotland, the bagpipes began to play in the village and the sound drifted in causing a, “goose-bump” moment (Probyn, 2004, p. 29).

![Figure 1. For Love of Appin: Harding, the Narrator, Mrs Buchan](image)

At the end of the year the students met for the last time and, over coffee, reviewed their year in Drama. They spoke enthusiastically about the experience of performing the plays to a public audience and of being able to connect to stories about their own journeys. There was still an excitement about being, perhaps, the first to present these plays for many years. It is always a difficult process to choose challenging and enjoyable material for students. These two plays captured the imagination of this group and gave them material they could engage with and own. A year later, after reading Sally Mackey’s research (Mackey, 2012) into memories of school productions I contacted a student who had taken part in the process. The student, now at university, was asked if she would reflect on the experience of playing Beatrice Galbraith in _The Voice of the People_. She stated in an email that,

As a ‘Kiwi-born’ student, I believe it is very easy to ignore the deeper and fundamental roots that underlie the history of the nation and why we are as we are today. Performing, rehearsing and discussing the play, _The Voice of the People_ was far from just a learning experience concerning New Zealand Theatre, it was also a creative means of insight into ‘old New Zealand’ culture. The goal was to interpret the piece in a way that resembled the time, setting and the culture of the characters as precisely as possible. I recall striving to accomplish this during the course of intensive rehearsals and it was then that the beauty (and intention) of the piece had really struck me. A deeply embedded humour had seeped through the language use in the piece. This completely abolished my pre-conceived notion that life in New Zealand comprised a hierarchical relationship between the sexes, hard labour, heavy daywear, the stiff upper lip and most importantly, no time for humour! The entire rehearsal-to-performance process was one that was novel, enjoyable but most of all, a memorable experience (Sharma, 2012).
Professor Greenwood’s archaeological dig has brought forth richness which can be freshly rediscovered by younger generations. The students can testify to Greenwood’s view that the plays do indeed, “speak to us, some ninety years later” (Greenwood, 2010). They speak not only as words on a page but as pieces of theatre which gives insight into emotions and, “New Zealand experience” (2010). The plays offered the students not only the opportunity to develop their performance skills and gain credits for an Achievement standard but they made discoveries about their country and for some the memory has remained with them. As for me, I can now look at the little book on my desk and know that behind the green/brown cover are rich texts and ones I may not have explored without Greenwood’s research and call to action.

Figure 2. The Voice of the People: Beatrice and Bromley

The Voice of the People by Alan E Mulgan as performed at Howick Historical Village by NCEA Level 3 Drama students.

Figure 3. The Voice of the People: Harrington, Bromley (The Narrator and Rachel)

Bibliography


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**Biography**
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**Jane Luton** is a PhD student in the Critical Research Unit in Applied theatre at the University of Auckland. She has been a teacher of drama and Head of department in schools in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Jane is a graduate in Theatre studies and Dramatic Arts from The University of Warwick and gained her Masters in Theatre from the University of Waikato. She has co authored two Drama Study Guides for Level 2 and 3 of the National Certificate in Educational Achievement and recently completed the updated Level 2 Guide. She is currently using drama, playbuilding and ethnographic performance as a methodology to explore metaphors in educational drama, in particular the battles and barricades. Email: jlut893@auckland.ac.nz