New Zealand/Aotearoa Plays and Playwrights:

*In Search of Our Theatre*

By

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**Abstract**

When beginning drama at senior level, what better place to start than with studying the theatre of your own country? New Zealand theatre is a growing and dynamic form with many manifestations. There is some debate on what the features of NZ theatre are and even whether such a form exists. With my Year 11 Drama class of 2005 we decided to look at a small selection of fairly current NZ plays with the aim of identifying possible features/aspects that may be common to New Zealand theatre and/or reflect NZ society.

This work on Stephen Sinclair’s, *The Bellbird* and Renee’s *Wednesday to Come*, was completed to fulfil the requirements of NCEA Achievement Standard 90008: Demonstrate knowledge of a drama/theatre form through a practical presentation. This report includes the student activity, assessment schedule and some examples of student work.
Introduction

Although there is a strand called *Understanding Drama in Context* in the New Zealand Arts Curriculum, the study of New Zealand drama is not mentioned until Level 8 with “[s]tudents will investigate the forms and styles of contemporary New Zealand drama and how they reflect our growing cultural diversity” (Ministry of Education, 2000. p.51). Many drama teachers believe, however, that students should have the opportunity to experience and explore drama and theatre that is close to home. To this end we take our students to live shows of New Zealand theatre and use New Zealand plays as examples when studying all aspects of drama and theatre.

At each level of senior drama (for the National Certificate of Educational Achievement: NCEA), there is a requirement to study a theatre period or form. This year, I decided to study the drama and theatre of New Zealand/Aotearoa at Level 1, the first year of senior drama¹. I do not think it is appropriate to wait until NCEA Level 3 (Level 8 of the Arts Curriculum) to study New Zealand theatre as a form. To this end I developed this unit of work, *NZ/Aotearoa Plays and Playwrights*. I chose three plays that would interest 15 year old girls and would present a reflection of different aspects of New Zealand life and society.

*Wednesday to Come* by Renee is set in the New Zealand of the 1930s and the Depression and it shows the effect of the Depression and the work camps on a family of women. *The Bellbird* by Stephen Sinclair is set in New Zealand of the 1800s and shows the relationship between a Pakeha woman and a Maori man. *Frangipani Perfume* by Makerita Urale is set in modern New Zealand and shows the relationship between three Samoan sisters and their experiences growing up in Samoa and New Zealand.

The students and I found the work very interesting and I will definitely do this unit again with Level 1 Drama. This report includes the unit of work/task sheets, some examples of students’ responses and two video clips of the students performing scenes from *Wednesday to Come* and *The Bellbird*.

¹ The use of levels for the Arts Curriculum and for NCEA can be confusing as there is no parity. NCEA Level 1 is akin to Level 6 of the Arts Curriculum.
**Student Activity**

**Drama Level 1**

**NZ / Aotearoa Plays and Playwrights**

Achievement Standard 90008  
Demonstrate knowledge of a drama/theatre form through a practical presentation  
Credits: 3

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**Student Instructions Sheet**

**Introduction**

In this activity you will study some plays and playwrights and the central influences and themes of New Zealand Theatre. You will identify key features of New Zealand Theatre and reference these within a presentation on NZ Plays and Playwrights which includes a performance of an extract from the text of a NZ play. You will perform in groups of two or three to an audience of your classmates. Your teacher will tell you when and where the performance assessment will take place – mark this and all rehearsal dates clearly in your diary.

You will need to complete all tasks in your portfolio as required and have your portfolio ready for submission prior to your performance. You may also use the knowledge from this standard to prepare for the externally assessed achievement standard 1.6, AS 90011.

This activity will take place over 6 weeks of class time. You will be expected to learn lines, complete research and portfolio tasks, and to attend extra rehearsals outside class time.

You are being assessed on your:
- clearly recorded knowledge of the themes and influences on NZ plays and playwrights
- clearly recorded knowledge and presentation of the features of NZ Theatre
- ability to perform your acting role in an extract from a NZ play.

**Task One: The Features**

- Your teacher will guide you through a reading of three NZ plays, *Wednesday to Come* by Renee, *The Bellbird* by Stephen Sinclair and *Frangipani Perfume* by Makerita Urale. Use the class discussions and your own research to record key features, themes and influences on NZ plays and playwrights in your portfolio.

**Task 2 The Research 1**

- Working as a group of 3 or 4, choose one of the plays. Your teacher will give you some key research questions based on that play. Use these questions to find out as much as you can about the central ideas, themes, sociological and historical context of the play. You will also need to find out as much as you can about the playwright, including other plays s/he has written. Lay out your work with headings, diagrams, labels, sketches, illustrations, and clear points.
Your purpose is to show your understanding of what was particular about this play and playwright and how it reflects and/or challenges society in New Zealand / Aotearoa.

Task 3 The Text
Reread the play you have chosen. Choose an extract that you will perform for an audience of your classmates. You will work in a group of three or four people. Stick a copy of your script into your portfolio. In your group, and with the guidance of your teacher, look closely at your extract and annotate it for evidence of the key features you have studied. You will use these in your performance. Ensure that your extract/s gives all group members the possibility to achieve excellence – ie that each person has a sizeable part to play.

Task 4 The Research 2
To show an understanding of the play and of your role in it make notes in your portfolio under the following headings:
- brief synopsis of the full play
- research into your character and her/his role in the play
- how your character reflects/challenges NZ society

Task 5 The Rehearsals
During the rehearsal period you will need to achieve the following:
- understand the meaning of the lines you are saying - work physically with the images in the lines
- understand the rhythm and pace – try throwing a ball to each other as a way to cue the rhythm in shared lines
- understand the status of the different characters and use this to inform your performance intentions
- understand the use of space - block and plot your moves onto a floor plan
- memorise your lines

Task 6 Assessment Presentation
For your assessment task, you will make a presentation on your chosen play and playwright to the class. This presentation should indicate relevant and thorough research about the play and playwright. You will present your research to the class, in the form of a teaching seminar.
- Introduce your play and playwright with the help of visual aids to help your explanations (eg. Posters, charts, OHTs, slides, photos, power-point, film, video, dvd, models, cartoon, props)
- Perform the extract of your play

You will be assessed on your:
- portfolio record of research of your chosen play and playwright
- record of the features, themes and influences on NZ theatre
- portfolio reflection of knowledge gained through performance

Task 7 Reflection
Reflect on your personal experience of the performance and of your knowledge of NZ/Aotearoa Theatre by answering the following questions in your portfolio:
- How did performing your extract help you to understand the features of NZ Theatre?
- What challenges did you encounter in performing this text?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achieved</th>
<th>Achieved with Merit</th>
<th>Achieved with Excellence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student participates in a presentation on one NZ play and playwright, which includes visual aids.</td>
<td>Features, themes and influences of this play and playwright identified through presentation and visual aids.</td>
<td>Range of apt features, themes and influences of play and playwright identified through presentation and visual aids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student completes all written tasks in portfolio, covering features, themes and influences on/of NZ Theatre, and research on character.</td>
<td>Features, themes and influences of NZ Theatre identified. Research questions on character completed. Annotated script shows features, themes and influences on/of NZ Theatre, character development, blocking.</td>
<td>Range of apt features, themes and influences of NZ Theatre identified. Research questions on character completed, showing good understanding. Annotated script shows features, themes and influences on/of NZ Theatre, character development, blocking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student participates actively in a performance of a scene from an NZ play.</td>
<td>Appropriate features of NZ Theatre used in performance of extract from an NZ play.</td>
<td>Appropriate features of NZ Theatre used in performance of extract from an NZ play.</td>
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Student Work
Research and discussion of these three plays by the students identified several aspects common to these New Zealand plays. They include mainly social and political issues but also a reflection of New Zealand/Aotearoa history, geography, language and custom.

Social and political issues identified:

- “Racism, land disputes, differing cultural ideas and acceptance” (Eliza Laycock, Annaleise Kulik and Lisa Nielsen writing about The Bellbird.)
- “This play is about two completely different cultures coming together and all the conflicts and troubles that come with it.” (Olivia Lynch, Tori Haysom, Georgia Elton and Sarah Hyndman writing about The Bellbird.)
- “Growing up in New Zealand as a Samoan girl and the clash between what your parents have experienced and your life” (Nicola Owen, Natasha Watson and Bryall McPherson writing about Frangipani Perfume)
- “In NZ's consumer-driven society, the play is more relevant than ever in providing a reality check for those unaware of the suffering and misery that went on not so long ago in order to get us to where we are today.” (Alex Bourn writing about Wednesday to Come)
- “This play explores the world of women...the strong, dominating independent role of women...is distinctly 'kiwi'. (Alex Bourn writing about Wednesday to Come)

Reflection of New Zealand/ Aotearoa history, geography, language and custom:

- “The play was set in the 1800s. This is important because at this time there were many difficulties of bicultural co-existence between Maori and Pakeha”; “It is distinctly New Zealand because the play ... incorporate[es] Maori language, culture, way of life”; “…also describes marriage between Maori and Pakeha”; “set in Marlborough and the reference to Kaiapoi pa”. (Olivia, Tori, Georgia and Sarah writing about The Bellbird.)
- “The fantasy of the beautiful island maiden and the reality of life for Samoan women in New Zealand are contrasted” (Nicola, Natasha and Bryall writing about Frangipani Perfume)
- “…set in 1934 during the Depression…at the time of the workers’ march from Gisborne to Wellington”; “[i]t exposes the atrocious conditions in the relief camps and the effect on women who are left to run households by themselves”. (Alex writing about Wednesday to Come)

These three plays, Frangipani Perfume by Makerita Urale, The Bellbird by Stephen Sinclair and Wednesday to Come by Renee, as a small sample of New Zealand/Aotearoa plays, indicate that there is something particular about the drama of New Zealand/Aotearoa. These plays reflect the people, society, geography and history of this country. They reflect the experiences, language and culture of Maori, Pakeha and Samoan New Zealanders. They are set in the history and geography of Aotearoa and so confirm for, and inform, our students of important places and times for New Zealand/Aotearoa.

New Zealand/Aotearoa drama is alive and flourishing, and it has an important role to play in our culture and education. I would urge drama teachers to explore our rich dramatic heritage and tradition with their classes. There are many plays to choose from and more being written and produced all the time. Let's embrace this rich
source of our culture and place New Zealand plays alongside those of Shakespeare and Caryl Churchill – a place they richly deserve.

**Bibliography**


