

range of meanings the exhibition and associated events contained and expressed. Is it a peculiar articulation of the local or a sign of cultural maturation if most other countries are also mounting their own extravaganzas? New Zealand had hosted other national exhibitions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so how did this one differ, if at all? How can we ascertain what the majority of New Zealanders thought and felt about it?

Jock Phillips's afterword 'reviews these events from the perspective of a present-day historian'. Subtitled a 'reading' of the centennial, it performs a much-needed function in the volume as a whole by bringing together many themes and commentary of individual contributions. He focuses on the values espoused amidst the conscious national stock-taking. He begins by acknowledging the smaller audiences that attended many of the events discussed in this volume, in contrast to the exhibition, and how it was those Pakeha in authority who self-consciously promoted this soul searching. The major themes of the 1940 centennial are no surprise to him nor to most readers: 'a century of good race relations; praise for the pioneer combined uneasily with tributes to material progress and New Zealand's natural beauty; an emphasis on the woman in the home; a view of government as beneficent and wide ranging; and a sense of New Zealand's identity as forged within the Empire'. He concludes that 'the enduring interest of the occasion is the balance between what is different and what remains the same'. With the rich and suggestive analyses of other national expositions now available we can surely go beyond the familiar change versus continuity dialectic.

Creating a National Spirit is a useful compendium, as was the earlier volume on the 1906 Christchurch Exhibition. Indeed, the Stout Centre is to be congratulated for supporting these and many other important history conferences and the resulting publications. Yet this book does not make the most of its opportunities to speak to wider historical issues in both New Zealand and international contexts. Nor does it tackle head on such cherished concepts as cultural nationalism and cultural maturity within a broader framework.

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Downstage Upfront: The First 40 Years of New Zealand's Longest-Running Professional Theatre. By John Smythe. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004. 512 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-8647-3489-1.

LOOKING AT THE ROLE OF THEATRE in a particular society and the evolution of dramatic performance as an expression of its fears and aspirations is a useful way of judging how that society thinks about itself. One aspect of this is the eagerness with which ordinary people perform, something we can see in the proliferation of dramatic societies from early colonization; another reason is the eagerness with which they stay away from other people's performances, meaning that the degree to which they do in fact attend is a reasonably accurate calibration of what they value. Shakespeare from the first, naturally, and touring productions from overseas, but, much earlier and more often than might be expected, local writers, too, using British and European models to express local and regional themes, often in rambunctious, well-attended shows featuring 'sensation scenes' — fires, volcanic explosions and balloon rides somehow simulated onstage in violation of all known public safety laws. By the time of the Centennial in 1940 a familiar landscape had emerged of amateur urban repertory and more ambitious projects like the Unity Theatre in Wellington and Auckland's People's Theatre, which quivered on the edge of the professional.

All this by way of introduction to John Smythe's excellent account of Wellington's

Downstage Theatre, which was established in the remains of a café upstairs in a building on the corner of Courtenay Place and Cambridge Terrace in June 1964 as the country's first professional theatre, and continues today on the same site but in the Hanna Playhouse, completed in 1972 as a perfect example of the new brutalism that some New Zealand architects seized as a basis (via the addition of plenty of local wood) of a national style. Smythe's compendious volume provides before-and-after shots, along with equally atmospheric photographs of performances showing now-grizzled veterans of our stage and screen in their pomp: Ian Mune, Ginette McDonald, Ray Henwood, Grant Tilly, and someone called Paul Holmes, caught in one photo hamming it on behalf of the muses. Smythe meticulously details Downstage's extraordinary number of productions, while his text describes as many of these as he can manage, illuminated with the kind of anecdotes that seem *de rigueur* for histories of the theatre, the sort readily available in an environment that provided not only bums on seats but food and wine on tables, and hence the occasional audience member who became a part of the show and, shortly after, a part of the street-life outside. The tightness of the early environment (no backstage; props were often hung in a box on ropes out of a window) tended to blur the boundary between inside and outside, leading to unexpected apparitions such as a policeman's head emerging out of Ophelia's grave during a performance of *Hamlet*.

Among the other pleasures of this book are its accounts of the artistic directors who successively stamped the waffle of art with the iron of their souls. There are the successes, like Colin McColl, an image from whose great 1990 production of *Hedda Gabler* adorns the cover, and the less successful, like the Canadian Sandy Black who came and went in the same year, 1967. Between are fallible human beings. Mervyn Thompson turned up in 1975 trailing clouds of glory from early Court Theatre productions but in due course was judged to be at heart a provincial maestro most at home with the student productions which he had begun directing. Ellie Smith's stormy two years 1998–1999 are tactfully presented by Smythe but with strong implications, like the mention of the need to change the locks at Downstage when her contract was terminated. John Banas injected intense energy and commitment in the early 1980s but, like a number of the theatre's artistic directors, seemed completely burnt out by the experience.

On the spectrum of professional theatre in New Zealand, Downstage occupies a place somewhere between Auckland's Mercury and its own spawn, Circa. What all those theatres bespeak, along with the Court in Christchurch, the Fortune in Dunedin, Centrepoint in Palmerston North and any others which followed Downstage in trying to pay people to present plays regularly while getting other people to pay to watch them, is the rise of the baby boomers, in other words the arrival of a large number of educated young men and women with a taste for food, wine and a spot of entertainment, plus the discretionary income to pay for them. From early on in its life, Downstage struggled with the materialism of which they were the presenting edge: how to maintain artistic integrity, even risking failure from time to time, without driving audiences away. Smythe's book records this balancing act, always the same for any theatre anywhere and only ever brought off consistently and at length, it seems, by the Court's Elric Hooper. Downstage's move into the present Playhouse after eight years of roughing it seemed to epitomize a larger loss of integrity; three years later, a breakaway group led by Grant Tilly formed Circa in an effort to get back to Downstage's original dream of an actor-led co-operative. At the other end of the spectrum, and in a reminder of the dangers of becoming over-established, Auckland's Mercury, a 700-seat monster built in Auckland 24 years earlier, closed down in 1992. In this context, Downstage's successful if sometimes precarious occupation of the middle ground and its survival to the present day seem remarkable, but all the clearer for Smythe's record of it.