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# **Roger Hall: Prisoner of Mother England?**

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## **Abstract**

For nearly thirty years Roger Hall has been a dominant figure in New Zealand theatre. His plays have been enthusiastically received and the new audience he has attracted into the theatre in large numbers has made a major contribution to the survival of both amateur and professional theatre in this country. However critical opinion has been divided and has not always reflected popular acclaim. Theatre critics, largely, have been more generous than professional critics who, while appreciating the qualities of his first five plays, appear to have found less of significant interest in his later work. In this thesis I consider Hall's plays written for theatre performance and suggest some reasons for the neglect of the professional critics.

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References

## Chapter One: The uses of criticism

Roger Hall has been a dominant presence in both amateur and professional theatre in New Zealand for the last twenty-six years - ever since the first production of *Glide Time* launched what can fairly be called a phenomenal career as a writer of comedy. Of all local playwrights he has been the most performed, the most discussed by the general public and the most successful at the box office, in New Zealand's theatre history. Only when he has written what audiences have perceived as 'serious' plays, such as *The Rose* and *Multiple Choice* has his popularity with theatre audiences wavered. Directors such as Alison Quigan, Elric Hooper and Stuart Devenie, confirm that most of his plays (the comedies) are enormously attractive to a large section of the theatre-going public, and he has, largely, scored well in the rave-review stakes in the press. It is not surprising, then, that he has featured regularly in the media, not only in newspaper reviews, but in interviews with popular magazines and on radio and television.

That most of the output of a writer who has won such accolades from his audiences has been largely neglected by what I shall call 'professional critics' of New Zealand drama must surely provoke speculation. Why has Hall not been the subject of more sustained critical analysis? In particular, why have professional critics, who received his first two plays with some enthusiasm, and who gave the following three reasonably positive critiques, found his later works to be less worthy of analysis or comment? The label 'professional critics' I use to cover academics as well as writers whose professional lives have been in the theatre. Indeed, some professional critics, such as Ralph McAllister, Lisa Warrington and Phillip Mann, have had careers in both academic and theatre worlds (as has Hall himself). The deep insights of both these groups, arrived at over many years of experience with page and stage, have given them critical authority; the expenditure of a life time of study or practice enabling them to explore the deeper recesses of works for the theatre. To come to some understanding of the impact which Hall's early work had on the New Zealand theatre scene, one could read the critiques of professional critics but anyone wanting to trace Hall's career beyond *Fifty-Fifty* will have to depend largely on 'theatre critics' who write reviews for the mass media. Although this group also includes academics such as David Dowling and John Ross, they are inhibited by the limitations of the review format.

I will argue that, while the first five plays have the distinguishing quality of empathy with their characters, most of whom are informed by Hall's own, largely English, life experiences, those written since 1981 (after *Fifty-Fifty*) demonstrate an opportunistic choice of subject, and characters whom he has based on accurate but detached observation of the surface of New Zealand life around him. The results lack the deeper authenticity of the early, autobiographically influenced plays and professional critics have apparently found little of significant interest in them.

First, it will be necessary to clarify the difference between professional critics as I have defined them, and 'theatre critics. Drama criticism requires informed response to both stage and page because plays are not purely literary works as are novels or poetry. Plays exist both as literary texts and as theatre events, that is, as happenings amalgamating text with interpretive direction, acting, setting, costuming and lighting for any specific production, all of which constitute their whole realisation. As Lisa Warrington has noted,

Not to be present at the performance, is to miss a very significant part of the whole. A play lives only in performance, and many of the elements that make that performance are missing from the words that appear on the page. ( 5)

Criticism of plays, whether from professional or theatre critics, therefore addresses itself mainly to two different groups of people - the audiences going to the theatre to see plays performed and those whose interest is also centred on the text as literature and the theory of theatre.

Let us begin with the theatre critics, as they have been ongoing commentators on the plays. Who are theatre critics? Can their judgement be relied upon? Elric Hooper, in a series of lectures delivered in Christchurch in 1975, handed down a harsh judgement of the quality of New Zealand theatre critics.

The lack of good, informed criticism becomes more obvious as theatrical activities proliferate. Too often still, the consideration of seriously produced work is left to someone without real theatrical knowledge or even literary background. Soon the newspapers will have to take more responsibility. (*Landfall* 348)

Since then he has maintained that 'the standard of theatre criticism in this country is abysmal,' because '...critics are not very knowledgeable about the state of the art and I think Roger has suffered from that.' (2001).

Theatre criticism aims to offer analysis, interpretation and evaluation of a work as performed for an audience and is usually written by journalists about a particular stage production. Such theatre critics must often perform a delicate balancing act between two loyalties; one to a theatre company which, to survive, needs a critic who will, if at all possible, announce that the glass is half full rather than half empty to persuade audiences that the play is worth going to, and one to the playwright. More often than not, theatre critics pay more attention to the achievement of actors and directors than of the author. Critiques from professional critics, on the other hand, primarily discuss the playwright's themes and the quality of the writing. What distinguishes these two groups of critics, however, is not only the focus of their professional interests but also the circumstances under which they work.

Newspapers occupy a world of deadlines and usually their theatre critics have to produce a review within an hour or two of seeing the performance. Typically they are limited to three hundred and fifty words and the sub-editor reserves the right to edit the text. Under such circumstances critical reflection is all but impossible. Even so, theatre reviewers frequently do offer spontaneous, perceptive responses to plays, but they can hardly provide in-depth analysis without more space and time for reflection. Most of the published critiques of Roger Hall's work has, since the 1980s, come from theatre critics (though some of these critics are, or have been in the past, academics) and much of this criticism suffers from the constraints I have mentioned.

Theatre critics responding to a performance can help audiences to reflect on what they have seen and heard and, to a degree, to refine their understanding of both the text and the skill with which director, cast and technicians have brought the play alive on stage. The best reviews of theatre performances are educative, both for performing companies and for audiences, raising issues of direction, acting and technical presentation, and thus generally helping to create a more informed theatre-going public. Their critiques may also contribute to the artistic growth of the playwright; writing is a solitary activity and playwrights benefit from the sounding board of informed judgement beyond their own. The hoped for results are the deepening of insights and the raising of performance

standards. Unfortunately theatre reviews do not often achieve these goals, partly because of the reasons I have referred to.

Coming to a play in a theatre is clearly a very different experience from reading it in the quiet of a study. In the theatre, the play reaches us through the eyes and ears. The eyes record the effects of light and dark, colour, costume, the set and the properties.

Movement and gesture, details such as the use of make-up and the visual messages from facial expressions as slight as a raised or lowered eyebrow all communicate with an audience. The ears hear words not just as units of meaning but as music; the rhythm of the dialogue, the actors' range of vocal colour and dynamic, the interpretation of character through phrasing and delivery of lines, and the eloquence of silence, all affect audience response. The use of music (always carefully selected by Hall) may help to establish an appropriate mood before the house lights go down and sometimes through the course of the play.

In the auditorium each performance will work differently, depending on the relationship which grows between the players and each particular audience. The atmosphere generated by the company in a theatre is reflexive; deep silences of intense concentration or gales of laughter, feed back to the actors whose performances are, in return, influenced by the audience's involvement. *All* of what happens on the stage is the play. What happens in the auditorium also influences the response of each individual audience member because each one is influenced by the group dynamic of the audience in a variety of subtle ways.

The 'buzz' of anticipation in an expectant auditorium is a powerful theatrical aphrodisiac. This is particularly true in the performance of comedy where, in Henri Bergson's phrase, there is a 'complicity with other laughers'. (64) Laughter is a social interaction. Martin and Gray (221-231), in a United Kingdom experiment, had students listen to a radio comedy episode under one of two conditions - one half of the group with canned laughter and the other, without. Those listening with canned laughter laughed more vigorously at the listening session and also later when recalling the programme, than those listening without the prompt of canned laughter. It would seem that the individual laughs only rarely when alone, much more in company, even if it is the company of a recorded audience. That a shared social culture contributes to an appreciation of comedy is suggested by an American trial. (Devereux 227-240) A

comic video was played to university students in three differently constructed groups. A third viewed alone, a third with a stranger, and a third with a friend. The students with a friend laughed appreciably more than the students in the other groups, which serves to confirm Bergson's complicity theory. Clearly, a theatre full of people who share the same kind of social life hold to the same attitudes and opinions, and who have come to enjoy a comedy with friends, constitutes an environment very different from the studied quiet of the scholar's reading from the printed page.

In an age when the small screen of television and close camera work have accustomed us to respond to small or fleeting visual messages, and when our live theatres tend to be smaller and more intimate, it is often the visual text as much as what is heard that progresses the drama. It is necessary, therefore, to understand the challenges facing a company, the production problems that must be resolved, and the mutual dependence of playwrights and performers. As Hooper points out, however, these issues are not always well understood by theatre critics who, while they are often extremely good journalists, do not always have the necessary practical theatre background experience to be able to recognise, or discuss, success or failure in a production. This may well be because, since the 1980s, fewer New Zealanders have involved themselves in amateur theatre.

The principal preoccupation of professional critics, is leading us to much deeper and more abiding insights through close reading of the text. With time for reflective study, they are able to analyse the playwright's themes and their treatment. Such critics will have a wide knowledge of the traditions of drama, its history, its many genres, its various styles, its social and political implications, and its use of language. They will also have time to develop critical commentary, placing a play in terms of history and its relevance to its period. They are able to capture resonances and to share their insights with a less informed reader or viewer who may, as a consequence, develop a deeper understanding of the play. They create perspective to help readers chart the challenging mountain peaks of theatre as well as its more comfortable rolling plains. Professional critics have largely been of the opinion that Hall's plays lack serious analysis of issues. It seems that, since *Fifty-Fifty*, in the opinion of professional critics, Hall has sited himself in the easier topography of the dramatic landscape but that consensus may arise from a tendency to overlook the performance component - the craft - of his plays.

But Hooper's caveat that to closely analyse the text alone is to limit attention 'to one sixth of a play' (Hooper Telephone interview), sometimes applies more to the professional critics than to the theatre critics. When they review a production their professional interest will also lead them to a close reading of the written text. This is certainly not how Hall expects his work to be received; it is necessary to keep in mind the impact of the actors' performances and the theatrical effects which he intends. Hall would certainly agree with Hooper that the script is an 'invitation to action.' An audience is to a play as clay is to the potter. Plays, depending on the two-way communication between actors and audience, are performed on a knife-edge. At any moment something might bring the whole to a collapse; any slight miscalculation on the director's or actor's part can destroy suspension of disbelief. Because of this inter-play there is a tension in performance that is not an element in the personal reading of a play script in the quiet of a study. So though professional critics have the advantage of time to investigate the intricacies of the script, they may sometimes forget, or even never experience, the subtleties of performance.

Hall, on the other hand, is always alert to the way the play works for the audience in the theatre. He is a man of the theatre first. He knows, it seems instinctively, about the dynamics of audiences and his focus has remained from the first on what will entertain them *in a theatre*. He confesses that he 'gets a glow when I think, oh God, the audience will laugh at this'. (Barnett 17) He pays detailed attention to the shaping and delivery of lines, especially to aspects that don't work at first in the way he intended. Directors have spoken appreciatively of Hall's modesty and willingness to listen to advice, to the point of adjusting or even rewriting sections before opening nights, or later.<sup>1</sup> He has an acute understanding of just how to lead an audience to the next laugh and is prepared to refine what proves to be ineffective in performance:

He is co-operative, attentive to changing shape and pattern, happy to cut and re-write, and always totally aware that plays are not born on a typewriter in isolation but like babies have to be slapped into life. His attitude, more than anything else, led to a boldness in manhandling the script towards the finished product. He seemed to know instinctively when to appear and when not to appear at rehearsals, when to arrive with scissors and typewriter and when to dig his heels in. (Taylor 7)

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<sup>1</sup> Even the name of his first play was not his choice; he resisted George Webby's suggestion vigorously before finally accepting that *Glide Time* had more impact than, *A Hard Day at the Office*.

While professional critics have the advantage of time to investigate the intricacies of the script they may forget that plays become plays only when they have been 'slapped into life' in the theatre.

Let us return now to the point raised at the beginning of this chapter. Considering his enormous popular success it is of some interest that, since 1981, Hall has attracted little serious 'professional' critical attention. Professional critics responded to the first five plays but have taken only limited interest in his work since *Fifty-Fifty* made its debut in 1981. Twenty-six years on from the opening of *Glide Time*, no major critical study of the Hall canon has yet been published. Professional academic writers such as Howard McNaughton, David Carnegie, John Thomson, Lisa Warrington, Richard Corballis and Sebastian Black have published, and occasionally still do publish, journal articles and reviews, albeit with diminishing frequency since 1981. Perceptive criticism has also come from theatre professionals such as Bruce Mason, Raymond Hawthorne, and Mervyn Thompson, but, generally, little of this has subscribed to the public's high enthusiasm. Howard McNaughton acknowledges Hall's achievements in language which implies a level of doubt, not only about Hall's plays, but also about the calibre of the audience he attracts:

The importance of the 'Roger Hall phenomenon' lies in defining, for the first time this century, a New Zealand mainstream theatre, unashamedly middle-class and cautiously intelligent. Only now that the area has been defined may New Zealand drama await its next chapter... (*Drama* 149)

Over the period since 1981 and, in some cases, even since *Glide Time*, professional critics seem to have had a nagging suspicion that while Hall captures the hearts of New Zealand playgoers he does not often engage their minds - that his plays are only light entertainments. He has been judged for his lack of serious analysis. Thomson charges him with being uninventive, seemingly unprepared to 'grapple with deeper emotions' and lacking 'the immediate intention of analysing society.' (92) Carnegie suggests that intellectual argument is not typical of Hall. (Personal interview 2002) Hall, in his turn, has been angered by the critics' apparent contempt for comedy. He is frustrated at not being taken seriously and complains that, in the eyes of professional critics, comedy is thought of as only light entertainment. Hooper agrees with Hall's claim that professional critics erroneously consider comedy to be less significant than serious drama:

There is an ancient prejudice that comedy is not as serious as tragedy. Comedy never gets the same attention as serious plays, particularly in Calvinist New Zealand. The theatre has to fight against a fundamental Calvinism about the theatre in New Zealand ... because of an ancient prejudice against pleasure. But pleasure is what the theatre has always been about. (2001)

Bergson questions those who would doubt the usefulness of comedy:

Can it ... fail to throw light for us on the way the human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective and popular Imagination? Begotten of real life and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life? (62)

Surely professional critics would agree? Writers of comedy have always maintained that their work is as serious in its intent as any tragic drama, and that it exists to tell us 'about art and life'. They also remind us that it is more difficult to write successful comedy than drama. In an interview with Iona McNaughton, Hall complained that he is frequently referred to as 'just a comic writer,' and that: 'the connotation is that comedy is somehow easier to write and not so important as the so-called serious play. But comedy is the hardest of all to write.' (19)

It is notable that while, at this point, the interview above was about the value of his 'themes', Hall led the discussion into a defence of his 'craft', which does not really overturn the professional critics' complaints about what they see as the shallowness with which he handles ideas, and his pre-occupation with laughter. Perhaps the issue is not so much one of the value of comedy as of Hall's safety-first approach to his subject matter. It can be argued that Hall is primarily concerned with his craft - with the 'how' rather than the 'what' and 'why,' and that his later work does not treat themes in any depth; that, for him, content is only a minor part of the play-making process. Ian Fraser, borrowing from the discourse of grammar, suggests that there is:

what might loosely be termed 'prescriptive' theatre and 'descriptive' theatre. Prescriptive theatre inclines to the partisan: others have referred to it as a 'theatre of ideas'. Brecht is probably the pre-eminent practitioner in this genre. 'Descriptive' theatre has more modest intentions. ("Hallmarked" 96)

Hall, in these terms, is clearly a writer of descriptive theatre. The plays, especially after 1981, certainly describe the surface of middle-ground New Zealand perceptively: the old phrase 'Hall showed New Zealanders themselves on stage' so frequently repeated, indicated that they recognised something of themselves in Hall's description. However, whether they learned anything about themselves or were challenged to think in any new way is open to question. The limited number of professional critics now writing about theatre in this country apparently consider that Hall's plays, which reflect the concerns of a limited and comfortable, even complacent, section of society, do not invite or reward critical analysis: that they simply entertain audiences who are only 'cautiously intelligent'. Does Hall cushion audiences whose caution dissuades them from exposing themselves to the uncomfortable risks of challenging ideas when they go out to the theatre? And if he does, is his work therefore less valuable? Do professional critics find only 'prescriptive' theatre worthy of analytical comment; is it only theatre of ideas which they value?

There have been murmurings over the last twenty-five years that Hall's plays continue to be essentially English in the 'West End' theatre tradition and that, while he captures the patina of New Zealand speech, the plays tend to be about people and situations that could very well be found outside this country. The office of *Glide Time* presents English office life as much as it does office life in Wellington. It is significant that a number of Hall's plays have, with limited minor adjustments, enjoyed successful productions in several English speaking countries. Hall has frequently expressed hopes for a play writing career in England and, despite the many geographical references that clearly place them in a New Zealand context, four of the first five plays find their sources in his life as an English man who came to New Zealand as a young man. While *Prisoners of Mother England* is the first play to examine a specifically New Zealand culture it does so, largely, by comparing it unfavourably with English life and manners, so confirming the validity of the 'cultural cringe' for which he later castigates the country he has adopted.

Professional critics have noted significant elements of New Zealand life which fail to claim Hall's attention. For example, since 1959, when he arrived in New Zealand, this country has seen a renaissance of Maori language and culture. Bicultural and, increasingly, multicultural issues, and the changing nature of New Zealand society command our attention, yet Hall seems to have been uninterested in, if not unaware of,

such changes. Already at the first appearance of *Glide Time*, Harcourt saw Hall's New Zealand as blandly trivial:

If New Zealanders can see themselves in the characters that are so glumly and comically ordinary in '*Glide Time*', they do not see any great conflict in our way of life. All they see is shades of grey, getting by as best they can, and trying not to think about anything complicated. (*Dramatic Appearance* 170)

McNaughton considers Hall to be notable for his commercial success: 'The recent growth of New Zealand drama is dependent on Hall for economic rather than artistic reasons.' (149) Such a comment raises the perennial question of the relationship between popularity and aesthetic quality. It seems that McNaughton considers the two are not easily compatible. Hall protests that his skills as a writer of comedy, which have contributed so much to his popularity, are not acknowledged and complains that he has been criticised for not writing the plays which professional critics have wanted him to write. I will return to this point in Chapters Four and Five where I analyse the nature of comedy, and Hall's comedic technique, but for the moment, it is important to note that Hall stands by his conviction as to comedy's seriousness of purpose.

For whatever reasons - and the foregoing material has suggested some possibilities - there has been a distinct cooling in professional critical responses from *Fifty-Fifty* on. Plays since then, such as *The Share Club*, draw on topical issues and their interests are often essentially ephemeral. With one notable exception, which I will discuss in Chapter Seven, the later plays seem to be lighter, more factitious, less concerned with analysis of themes than with superficial social description and they have been neglected by professional critics who may feel that Hall has reflected the English culture in which he grew up more successfully than he has captured the spirit of his country of adoption.

Why have the professional critics fallen silent?