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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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## 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?

## Chapter Two: The theatrical inheritances of Roger Hall

Hall has inherited the ingredients of his success from English and New Zealand sources. The English sources include: his middle-class, London, beginnings, his father's strong sense of humour (as well as the dark side of his personality) and the experience of regular visits to see comedy in professional London theatres throughout his childhood. This English heritage I will expand on in Chapter Three.

The New Zealand sources include: a vigorous amateur theatre tradition, a commitment to radio drama, the establishment of a national television network, the development of professional theatre, and the growth of a sense of nationhood as ties with Great Britain have loosened.

The amateur theatre tradition established its roots in the earliest years of European colonial settlement. Amateur theatre constituted the main source of dramatic entertainment in early New Zealand. McNaughton records regular theatrical performances in the colony by 1843 and the first locally written play in 1848. (*Drama* 15-16) Amateur theatre groups could be found thriving in small rural areas, in towns and in cities, and their productions included locally written plays which treated a wide range of themes including specifically New Zealand themes. For example, Maori/Pakeha relationships made significant appearances. McNaughton notes of Leitch's *Land of the Moa*:

The subject...was colonial warfare, and the final affirmation was patriotic, with the singing of 'Rule Britannia'. In such a context, one might expect a Maori villain, and yet the Black Angel is emphatically American, while a Maori princess is a heroine. (*Drama* 23)

He further notes that while the play exhibited the extremes of melodrama, the American villain 'seems to have functioned as a scapegoat for the audience's sense of imperialist guilt.' (25) From the amateur theatre came plays that were published, and which achieved productions overseas; Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, for example, was produced in Australia and in England, running for five hundred performances in London in the late 1880s. Later, in the 1930s, Merton Hodge's plays won audiences in England, Europe and the USA, *The Wind and the Rain* enjoying a

London season of three years. Clearly the New Zealand amateur theatre has been a healthy nursery for playwrights.

To encourage the writing and performance of one-act plays the New Zealand branch of the British Drama League was established in 1932. Amateur theatre companies in cities and in isolated rural communities competed annually for British Drama League awards in local, regional and national one-act play festivals. For small amateur groups such festivals often became the focus of the year's activity in which actors, directors and back-stage crews learned, in a 'hands on' way, what makes theatre work. 1945 saw the foundation of the New Zealand Drama Council to promote national drama schools and competitions for full-length plays as well as one-acters, and to co-ordinate the theatre activities of major amateur companies.<sup>1</sup>

One of those companies was Wellington's Unity Theatre, founded in 1942. With a strong socialist philosophy, its mission was to produce plays which challenged the earnest, self-satisfied and largely puritanical social life of European settlers in this country. Howard McNaughton points out that in Bruce Mason they found '...a writer with the talent and audacity to confront national complacencies skilfully and to force a reaction from audiences attuned to West End pleasantries.' (*Mason* 46) Thomson notes that Unity Theatre determined to 'present plays which are real and sincere in their presentation of life' (Thomson 30) and in 1953 Mason's *The Bonds of Love*, written for the company, showed audiences a reflection of themselves which shocked them. If audiences were outraged then, his next play, *The Evening Paper*, following immediately, while not causing much of a stir at its first stage performances in 1953, created an uproar when it was screened on television in 1965. McNaughton suggests that, at its first appearance, it was 'apparently accepted in terms of stark reality or unreality. By 1965 the play could no longer be regarded as completely unreal....' (*Mason* 10); and that that recognition threatened audiences. Thomson notes Mason's receiving letters containing such messages as 'May God forgive you for this crime against your country.' (31)

Mason is significant for his sustained investigation of what constituted New

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<sup>1</sup> In 1970 the British Drama League and the New Zealand Drama Council amalgamated to become the New Zealand Theatre Federation. The new organisation continued and extended the work of its parents under the Federation's banner.

Zealandness, and our social attitudes. That is, in spite of their displeasure, he was showing New Zealanders themselves in the theatre in 1953, when Roger Hall was still only a fourteen year-old schoolboy on the other side of the world.

Mason's first play drew its title from the second line of the New Zealand national anthem and McNaughton notes,

...with heavy irony... strategically undermines much of the then legendary vision of New Zealand as the egalitarian utopia of the South Seas. (*Drama* 46)

According to Harcourt, Mason's work implies that 'the colonist's real blight on the land' was 'a loveless philosophy' of 'stultifying conformity and a suffocating middle-class respectability.' (*Dramatic Appearance* 100) Another 'real blight' Mason identified was the conversion of Maori to Christianity, which forced them into a choice between their traditions and assimilation into the European culture. This theme found a voice in all four of his major Maori plays. In the first of those plays, *The Pohutukawa Tree*, written in 1956 for New Zealand's first, short-lived, professional theatre company, the New Zealand Players, to which I will return, he made an early attempt to write material that brought the two cultures closer together. Mason identified the Maori resistance to the prevailing Calvinism in this country as an issue dividing settler and tangata whenua. He was, in McNaughton's words, 'the first dramatist to pass beyond the crude tourist perspective of the biracial basis of New Zealand society,' and to approach some kind of appeasement. (*Mason* 49)

In 1958, the New Zealand tour of Emlyn Williams' pair of one-man programmes, presenting readings of Dickens and Dylan Thomas, inspired Mason to treat New Zealand material in a similar way. Beginning with a reworking of one of his own short stories of the same name, he developed his first highly successful solo work, *The End of the Golden Weather* with which he toured the entire country on more than one occasion, giving nearly one thousand performances over a period of twelve years. In that piece, Mason captured the essence of growing up in a young country at the time of the depression of the 1930s. Hall enjoyed it immensely but notes, significantly, that it 'described a childhood unfamiliar to me'. Using his material as a metaphor for what McNaughton calls the 'man-making process' (*Mason* 40), Mason traces the child's uneasy passage through childhood into the adult world. The man being made was a

New Zealander, an adult with a childhood history in which audiences joyfully discovered personal connections with a shared culture, a culture which Hall can never fully share. The format proving popular, Mason followed it with five more such one-man pieces through the 1960s and up to 1976.

During the 1960s Mason made further significant contributions to a national, New Zealand theatre and to growing bicultural understanding, with his four plays treating Maori-Pakeha integration themes. Originally written for radio, *Awatea* attracted a Wellington audience of nine thousand in a period of four days in 1968.

During the same period, James K. Baxter, though lacking Mason's theatre skills, wrote plays, often for radio, with themes of human frailty and mutability, alcoholism and the influence of Christianity. Baxter was concerned with the role of a liberal Christianity in bridging the struggle between a rigid Calvinism and animal passions. The resulting theme of the responsibility of the individual to recognise the importance of social and political freedoms was not very popular in a restrictive society. Thomson points out that, while the blasphemous and crude texts may have offended many, 'the real offence lay in the author's social and religious iconoclasm.'<sup>2</sup> (65)

The fifties and sixties tended to be dominated by serious drama which explored the social and spiritual facets of existence in this country. The dream of a national theatre to provide an arena for indigenous plays and support for New Zealand playwrights had faded with the demise of the New Zealand Players which finally succumbed to the exigencies of touring and collapsed in 1960. However, during the 1960s the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, which in its earlier incarnations had supported New Zealand drama since the 1930s, continued to contribute significantly to the encouragement of New Zealand writers. Early in that decade, as a result of improving production facilities, some dozen plays a year were broadcast under the direction of William Austin and by the end of the decade the total number had risen to fifty annually.

The financial rewards offered by radio to new writers like Joseph Musaphia, Max Richards and Owen Leeming, and more established writers like Mason and Peter Bland,

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<sup>2</sup> A typical response to such writing was the phrase which titled Mason's revue *We don't want your sort here*. It was a phrase quite commonly heard in the intolerant fifties and sixties.

provided valuable support throughout the 1960s. Some writers, such as Warren Dibble, Bland, Musaphia and Robert Lord, continued to write for radio into the 1970s. Thomson quotes Musaphia as saying, 'My practical teacher and sponsor has been, and still is, the N.Z.B.C.' (49). He suggests that the increase in audiences for radio drama indicated a quickening of interest in drama of all kinds, and he notes that this interest, fostered so enthusiastically by radio productions, encouraged large commercial companies to see value in associating themselves with the theatre by offering financial sponsorships for new writers and productions. For example, only six years after its beginning as a professional intimate theatre company, in 1964, Downstage had already attracted financial sponsorship from New Zealand Breweries, Wright Stephensons, Shell Oil and the *Evening Post* and, at the end of the decade, it enjoyed support from further major sponsors such as Challenge Corporation and Caltex. A particular highlight occurred when, as a result of a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation to encourage new theatre writers, Downstage Theatre, over a period of six months, offered a season of New Zealand plays which was a financial as well as an artistic success, proving that there was an audience for locally written plays and that that audience needed to grow. During this decade there was an upsurge in play writing; Harcourt noted, without defining the term, that 'after 1960 the New Zealand voice was heard with growing confidence more and more frequently'. (108)

McNaughton identifies some major reasons for this development.

No single event can account for the spectacular intensification of New Zealand play writing since the mid 1960s although vital influences lay in the progressive policies of the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, in the production approaches of Downstage Theatre and the various community theatres that followed it, and the restructuring and coordination of amateur theatre. (*Drama* 83)

The 1960s was a decade of change in this country. Two major events which were to have a profound effect on the New Zealand theatre scene were the arrival of television in 1963, and the establishment of Downstage Theatre in Wellington in 1964, heralding the era of permanent, locally based, professional theatre. Television, bringing the world into New Zealand's living-rooms, changed the social climate of this country considerably and irrevocably. While it can be said to have benefited from the challenge of professional standards, the amateur theatre undoubtedly suffered when television supplied a wide range of easily accessed entertainment without requiring its audience to

leave home. Because they saw the work of professionals on their screens every day, people tended to become more critical of, and less satisfied by, the less sophisticated efforts of amateurs.

The New Zealand Players had collapsed largely because of the enormous cost of taking productions the length of the country to audiences from Whangarei to Invercargill but what had been made clear during its brief life-time was that there was an appetite out there for professional theatre and that such a theatre could survive if settled permanently in centres of population, freed from the crippling costs of touring. In 1964 a small intimate theatre, appropriately named Downstage, was successfully established in Wellington. New Zealand appeared ready to sustain professional theatres with permanent homes and more such theatres were established, even outside the metropolitan areas. In the rural out-skirts of the small Horowhenua town of Shannon, for example, there appeared a semi-professional group performing in an adapted farm shed. While this, along with small semi-professional companies such as Gateway in Tauranga and Four Seasons in Wanganui, did not survive, a significant number of New Zealanders can still access professional theatre within a reasonable travelling distance. As a result the old amateur theatre-going public has become more selective and demanding with respect to quality and is more drawn to the professional community theatres:

Amateur societies in the larger cities, now without the justification that they were keeping drama alive for a theatre-starved public, returned to their much earlier role of providing members with their chosen form of social recreation in their own little theatres. (Thomson 71)

During the 1960s it was steadily, if reluctantly, becoming accepted that Great Britain, so long revered by a population predominantly descended from English stock as reliable 'Mother England', would be impelled to reconsider her cultural and economic relationships with Europe. New Zealanders became aware that long-established British markets were no longer going to be automatically available to our exports were the European Economic Community to be extended to include the U.K. Many New Zealanders were deeply concerned, fearful of our orphan status but others, especially in the world of arts and letters, recognised the possibility of discarding the cultural cringe which had permeated the previous century and of making our own way in the world, culturally as well as economically. The establishment of professional theatre

encouraged local writers to give theatrical expression to themes of interest to a developing nation in a new world.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, as Britain's trade with this country steadily diminished, New Zealanders were forced to search the wider world for new markets and, as a result, the country grew less insular and more confident, developing a new vision of its place in a changing world. Television offered a domestic viewing platform from which to see New Zealand as a distinctive society. This growing self-perception was paralleled by a rising tide of nationalism, with its accompanying optimism. One result was that New Zealanders developed the confidence to laugh at themselves and to enjoy doing so, and from this arose New Zealand's first popular satirists who found our barely concealed nerves with accuracy in the early 1970s. One of the most popular satirical creations, John Clarke's Fred Dagg, a man on the land, caught the public's imagination. Here was somebody who looked like people we knew and talked like them, even when we cringed at some of his more uncomfortable accuracies. He was closely followed by Ginette McDonald's equally recognisable, urban creation, Lyn of Tawa (who made her debut in a Downstage revue with the young Roger Hall). Billy T. James successfully allowed us to laugh at both Maori and Pakeha. New Zealand humour enjoyed a high summer, fostered by television, which was becoming a hot-house for growing the professionals needed for a professional theatre.

The 1970s were notable for the growth of a theatre audience which enjoyed seeing its culture validated in the theatre, an audience that wanted not only to see its attitudes and values confirmed but also to confront hard questions about the way New Zealand was growing up. People were going to the theatre prepared to think. In 1972, Mervyn Thompson's *O! Temperance!* took a sharply entertaining look at our relationship with alcohol, Craig Harrison hypothesised about the future of Maori/Pakeha relationships, and Gordon Dryland bravely essayed themes of sexual diversity. There was a growing appetite for professional theatre which was expanding vigorously in the major cities. In 1975 Downstage had to transfer productions of *O! Temperance* and Musaphia's *Mothers and Fathers* to the Wellington Opera House to accommodate the enormous demand. It is true that some of the myriad new local plays were derivative, but largely they were about New Zealanders and made perceptive comments about living in this country. Harcourt's comment that *The Pohutukawa Tree* was 'old-fashioned but at least about something,' (104) reminds us that up to the 1960s a significant part of the local

theatre-goers' diet offered by the amateur theatre, and by occasional overseas touring companies, had been light comedy of English, West End, provenance, which was simply what Barry Humphries would call 'a nice night's entertainment.'

An effect of the increasing availability of professional productions, as Thomson notes, was that amateur societies drew smaller audiences and experienced increasing financial problems.<sup>3</sup>

The 1970s was the decade of professional theatre....

What they offered - which even the largest and best organised amateur societies could not - was regular theatre, staged by actors, backstage crew and administrative staff whose livelihood depended on their success. (69)

In 'am-dram' groups people had enjoyed themselves, made friends and frequently met their future partners while rehearsing a play. Their work had resulted in many fine performances and it was fun. However, social patterns of entertainment were rapidly changing; the professional theatres which were warm and intimate, perhaps operating as restaurant theatres with a bar, were attracting a public who looked to the theatre for a complete evening's entertainment. They also worked to promote acceptance of New Zealand plays rather more than the amateur theatre had done. Thomson notes that this

does seem to show a greater readiness in theatre audiences than ever before to contemplate themselves and their society in dramatically presented images which they were ready to identify. (70)

McNaughton calls the 1970s a period of 'confrontational drama'. The physical immediacy of the small theatre made possible a departure from the less 'formal' style of the well-made play seen through a proscenium arch. Theatre in the round, traverse stages, cabaret, vaudeville, rock-opera, audience involvement, expressionism, satirical revue sketches - all contributed to an exciting variety of theatre. 'With the liberation of styles came a new freedom in articulating local themes.' (*Drama* 120) Writers

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<sup>3</sup> Until the 1970s, Palmerston North supported an amateur operatic society and two amateur theatre companies. The Manawatu Repertory company and the Little Theatre merged in order to survive, as Manawatu Theatre. Since then that company has experienced a steady decline in artistic standards, and has had to cope with a loss of interest in 'straight theatre', resulting in continuing financial crises as production costs have risen. Musicals, on the other hand, have been more strongly supported.

confronted ideas and challenged attitudes. It seems that *Glide Time* was right on time. It supplied comedy, it was about New Zealanders like us, and it offered satirical comedy which was satisfying without, however, being too demanding.

The wide media acclaim that Hall has enjoyed since *Glide Time*'s explosive enthusiastic debut, has encouraged a mistaken belief that there were very few plays focusing on New Zealand life written or performed before the advent of Roger Hall. Richard Boraman, a Wellington playwright, claimed of Hall that,

Before he made it in the early seventies with *Glide Time*, the attitude of the public was that New Zealanders couldn't write plays, particularly about New Zealand things. No one would go and see them if they did.... With *Glide Time* all about New Zealanders, the public suddenly accepted New Zealand playwrights and plays set in New Zealand. (3)

Such ill-informed opinions have persisted; Hall himself has contributed to this misrepresentation of New Zealand theatre history. His claim that *Glide Time* was 'the first time New Zealanders could truly recognise themselves on stage' (Dungey 70) is untrue. New Zealanders had seen themselves there before Hall though not, perhaps, portrayed with such sure-footed assurance. Many of the plays written up until the Second World War presented characters in a largely rural setting. Hall's focus has been on middle New Zealand, a largely urban, comfortable, middle-class, narcissistic, audience, which enjoys gazing at its own image. He indulges their taste, reflecting that image with satire which is carefully restrained. But Mason, Musaphia and Lord also wrote solidly suburban plays. Reading about Hall in the popular press one could be excused for concluding that he materialised suddenly, in Bruce Mason's phrase, 'like Athene from the skull of Zeus', (Mason 1978) creating popular New Zealand theatre at a stroke with *Glide Time*. This erroneous perception was irritating, at least to Mason, who had successfully fostered and grown a theatre audience since the 1950s. Hall's plays were planted and grew in good soil which had been well prepared. *Glide Time* was a landmark, not a beginning.

In 1981, during the first run of *Prisoners of Mother England*, McNaughton noted the kind of new and exploratory work that was being achieved in New Zealand at the end of the seventies by 'more substantial playwrights' such as Lord, Mason, Musaphia, John Banas, Thompson, Dryland and Paul Maunder (a list that includes almost everybody of significance then writing for the theatre). Those writers, he considered, were the local

voices who were the architects of a New Zealand professional theatre. But their commercial success was variable. On the other hand, Hall's breakthrough was proving that New Zealand plays could succeed at the box office. His work continued to increase in popularity with relatively few stumbles, and the enthusiasm of audiences for his plays grew with their number. However, since the early eighties, professional critiquing of his work has waned. Professional critics may respond to Hall's occasional nod at a contemporary issue, but generally find nothing to comment on beyond the plays' potential to provide an evening's entertainment. With the exception of a handful of plays they have seen little to discuss. It would seem that that is also true of media journalists; interviews with Roger Hall are usually more about him than about the plays. He has become an icon to his admiring, albeit increasingly middle-aged, audience, which is very loyal; to criticise him is often to invite heated argument. However, when the next chapter of the history of theatre is written, it will be to texts that the historian must finally turn. Professional critics then mapping the development of theatre, while acknowledging playwrights' abilities to engage audiences with passing pleasures, will be more concerned with plays which have survived mere topicality, and which have been substantially formative in the development of a New Zealand national theatre, with a consequent deepening understanding of our society. Hall's concentration on a limited section of New Zealand society which is most like himself, and his determination to fill theatres with plays redolent of London's West End, and whose content since 1981 has tended to be of ephemeral interest, may not provide very much of value when the plays are exposed to analysis. It could be that, seen in historical perspective, his Englishness will appear more notable than his contribution to a New Zealand culture. Certainly his English inheritance has been profoundly formative in his work, as I shall argue in Chapter Three.

### Chapter Three: Biography of an Autobiographer

When the autobiographer thinks of himself or herself as a writer and would put down 'writer' (or 'poet', 'novelist' or 'playwright') when asked for a profession, the tendency is to produce autobiography in various guises in every work. (Olney 236)

In an interview with Rosemary McLeod, Hall said,

I am in all my plays. All my characters are part of me. I can see where they are. (113)

On studying the first five plays, it is difficult to escape the feeling that they contain recollections of specific experiences from Hall's own life, and rereading them with Hall's autobiography at hand, confirms the marked similarity between his art and his life.

While the pervasive authorial presence probably narrows his field of vision, it seems to me, to continue the metaphor of the camera, that it has sharpened his focus in the first five plays. Novice writers have always been advised to 'write what you know.' In the first five plays Hall does just that, perhaps too slavishly, but because he *is* in those plays there is a verisimilitude in his observation that results in a satisfying mix of satire and pathos.

Roger Hall was born in Woodford Wells, Essex, on January 17, 1939, to middle-income, middle-class parents. 'We were very middle-class,' he writes in his autobiography (*bums* 24), giving several examples of features which would mark a middle-class family such as his own - the family's place in the neighbourhood pecking order on the continuum from professional to tradesman; the use of standard English; and the 'correct' choice of newspapers for Sunday reading. Life was ordered and seemed happy though, as he grew older, he began to perceive his parents' relationship more maturely. He paints a picture of a small family living a private life, but the references to Hall senior's love of entertaining guests at dinner parties suggests that his parents did have some social life.

While he doesn't seem to have been an unhappy only child in such a self-contained family, his autobiography does convey a sense of isolation and discontent in the home.

He portrays his parents as an ill-matched, relatively unfulfilled couple and during his teenage years he became more aware of the tensions between them. His mother, the child of the broken marriage of German parents, grew up in the England of the First World War. With the distinctly German name of Hilda Feuerstahler, as Hall says, social life must have been a miserable experience for her as the war progressed, possibly accounting for the 'intensely private' person that he describes her becoming. (19) Hall's mother was a markedly contained, serious, woman who clearly held her emotions in check. She was an avid reader and a school teacher but Hall makes little mention of her career. He, himself, later became a teacher on the other side of the world,<sup>1</sup> and though she may not have actively encouraged him into the profession, it would seem likely that she had a greater influence on Hall than he admits. Education was the background to, and became a central activity in, his own life; teachers make regular appearances in the plays and education has been a recurring theme. Colin, Reg and Judy, in *Middle-Age Spread*, are all teachers. Philip, in *Prisoners of Mother England*, becomes a teacher. In the later plays, nearly all the characters in *Social Climbers* are teachers and Agnes, in *The Share Club*, is an Infant Mistress.

Unlike his mother, his father, Sidney Hall, was sociable with a marked sense of humour and he is central to Hall's childhood recollections which seem dominated by his father's sense of humour and appetite for comic theatre. Hall expands on the delight his father took as a comic raconteur, making it clear that it was from his father that he inherited his sense of humour and his love of comedy.

However, Sidney Hall had a limited sense of responsibility, both at home and at work in an insurance company that 'he loathed for the forty years he worked for them'. (22) Hall gives the impression of an immature man of volatile temperament whose enthusiasms could be short-lived and who, on occasions, acted spontaneously and with poor judgement. He was apparently not a thoughtful husband or father and seems to have been a man with limited personal interests beyond what amused him.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact he enrolled at Wellington Teachers' College as a response to a spontaneous and serendipitous suggestion made by a girl-friend's mother. It is perhaps worth noting here the key decisions in his life that Hall recalls being made in much the same way. It was his father who suggested that he leave Great Britain to avoid the draft. It was while on a visit to England and America that someone suggested that he should attend the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights' workshop, which was where he decided to focus on writing a full length stage play rather than TV scripts and sketches. (*bums* 117).

Hall describes the atmosphere in the Hall household as ‘an emotional minefield’ and, while he doesn’t labour the issue of rows between husband and wife, he does record his father’s emotional volatility and says of his mother that ‘at best she retaliated.’ (24) The climate of many of the plays, in which most of the relationships are unhappy or stressful, possibly has its origins in Hall’s personal sensitivity to the latent unhappiness in his parents’ marriage. Moreover he grew up in a sheltered and closed domestic environment; there were few wider family contacts beyond his parents.

I was born in January 1939. Freud and Yeats were still alive, and World War 2 was about to start: an only child with no cousins, no grandparents, one aunt, some great -aunts and one great-uncle. (*bums* 22)

This statement underlines the sense of solitude which re-echoes in a remarkable number of his plays, where a lack of empathy between characters creates separating gulfs.

It is clear, however, that his family life was unquestionably happy at the weekends when they went into London to shop, to visit museums and art galleries and, best of all, to go to the theatre in the West End, where they enjoyed ‘mostly comedies,’ of which they saw many. It was in that theatrical milieu that Hall developed his passionate love of the comic theatre. Many of the plays that he saw would have been examples of English ‘well made’ plays and his memories of excited audience laughter at pantomimes are vividly recalled in the autobiography. The revue element of those pantomimes was doubtless germinal to his later affection for the revue sketch, and the dearly loved radio programmes he listened to in England would have reinforced that affection. Most of those he recalls were comedies composed of sketches - ‘*ITMA*’, ‘*Take it From Here*’, ‘*Ray’s a Laugh*’, and ‘*The Goons*’. More notably, ‘*Hancock’s Half Hour*’ has remained a favourite (27) and a model, with its hair’s breadth separation of high comedy and pathos:

A lot of the humour I liked was the humour that is balanced very delicately between comedy and tragedy. ‘*Steptoe and Son*’ is a classic example - it is actually very painful to watch. (Cohen 13).

He does not seem to have been a particularly focused or academic child at school where his career was undistinguished:

What sort of kid was I? I was never very interested in schoolwork. You did it because you got into trouble if you didn't. I can't say I had a huge thirst for knowledge. (McLeod 115)

His academic history suggests an easily distractible student with a desire to court attention by making others laugh; it appears that Hall adopted the path of many an under-achiever, seeking attention and acceptance by diverting others. He had a model in his father:

The best thing about school was that there was an audience. For when you made jokes. And I made jokes all the time. (*bums* 33)

School was clearly a training ground for this master of the 'one-liner' and it can reasonably be claimed that the comedy in the plays relies on jokes rather than wit, a matter I will return to in Chapter Four.

In the autobiography Hall reveals that the family's favourite pastime was reading which, doubtless, was fostered by his mother's love of books. He goes on to detail those he remembers reading before the age of eight. The range of quality children's books then available in immediately post-war Britain was not as wide as it is today, but those which Hall lists don't suggest that he was a sophisticated reader. Beyond the age of eight and on into his teens he mentions continuing reading, but, surprisingly for someone whose later life has been preoccupied with words, he doesn't give any indications of what he read then beyond a brief reference to some non-fiction periodicals and boys' annuals.

Hall is disarmingly frank about his mediocre school reports, both at primary and secondary level. His lack of a sense of direction, which he seemed to have shared with his father, and his poor academic progress, brought a warning from his school that he would not qualify for entrance to university. His father immediately withdrew him and secured him a job like his own, in an insurance office. Despite the fact that his father 'loathed' his own daily working life, Hall seems to have accepted that decision unquestioningly. With its daily bureaucratic routines, that London office and, subsequently, the State Fire Insurance office in Wellington, provided a template of the office so vividly created in *Glide Time*.

In 1958 Hall faced compulsory military training with some trepidation. To avoid it he opted to apply for pilot officer training in the R.A.F. In the light of his school record it is not surprising that he proved not to be officer material, and so he took his father's advice to emigrate for two years. He chose to come to New Zealand because he thought it would be more English than Australia. (44) As an assisted immigrant with English insurance office experience he was posted to the State Fire Insurance in Wellington, which constituted a working world remarkably similar to that of his London office. He seemed to enjoy it. In London he had organised staff visits to the theatre; in Wellington he and a friend took to the stage themselves and joined the Thespians, an amateur theatre company, so beginning his life-long active participation in theatre and laying solid foundations for his future career as a playwright.

After honouring his two-year immigration bond, but experiencing recurring bouts of homesickness, Hall decided to return to England via a working break in Australia. However, on his arrival he found that nothing in London had changed and, like many emigrés who find themselves unhappy in their country of adoption, he was even more unhappy back home. He found the atmosphere stultifying in the old office, where his previous colleagues were still 'in exactly the same place,' doing the same things. (63) His return to England confirmed for him that he could not re-adjust to the life that he had lived there. This cultural ambivalence has continued to be a presence in his life. He then decided, like many before him, to return and settle in New Zealand, although he stayed on in London for a further eight months, taking available opportunities to see a great deal of theatre. Again, the West End was the magnet that drew him.

One production which made a significant impact on him was the revue *Beyond the Fringe*<sup>2</sup>.

Hall notes that it was 'the show that was to have more direct influence on me than any other.' (63) The company included actors who were later to prove some of the most successful English writers of comedy - Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. The brilliance of their work influenced him strongly and prompted him to attempt similar sketches himself. Later, the creation of such short comic pieces as he

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<sup>2</sup> Written for performance on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival, it enjoyed such an enormous popular success that it transferred to the London stage and eventually enjoyed a world tour, (including New Zealand).

had seen in *Beyond the Fringe* were to bring him notable successes both at Downstage (in popular late-night revues like *Knickers* and *Knackers*) and in television's satirical *Under the Circumstances*. In fact, the revue sketch format can be said to have influenced all his later work both positively and negatively, as I shall discuss further in Chapter Six.

Many of the autobiographical threads identified so far come together in *Prisoners of Mother England*. Built from a string of revue sketches, it draws on Hall's first experiences of New Zealand, about which he had mixed feelings. In this country he valued the freedom from an English class system which limited possibilities, but the autobiography notes with dismay the lack of style in clothes (pastel ties with sports coats get a thorough drubbing), ugly architecture, the lack of good restaurants and coffee, the six o'clock closing of public bars with the resulting preponderance of drunks in the streets, his astonishment at the country's old-fashioned, even primitive, urban appearance and the absence of television. These same features are targets of criticism in *Prisoners of Mother England*. There, portrayed as Philip, he presents himself as a young 'marginal man' of the Great Britain of the 1950s, astonished by, and slighting of, New Zealand life which trailed behind London by fifteen or twenty years. His assessments of his new land are based on comparison with the world he had grown up in, and they frequently border on the derisive. While there can be little doubt that Hall has come to a sense of belonging, it has been won rather than inherited. His warmth of feeling when he could say, 'Now I owned a piece of New Zealand; it was a nice feeling' (91), is understandable, but it is expressed in terms which New Zealanders do not have to use.

In its many details, *Prisoners of Mother England* is the most transparently autobiographical of Hall's plays. He says, 'Nearly all the incidents in the play are true... . It's no secret to admit that Philip's experiences are largely my own'.  
(*Prisoners Note*)

For example, Philip's description of the passing coastline as the TSS Captain Cook sailed down the Clyde from Glasgow is described in this play in almost identical language to that in the autobiography, as is the sight and smell of oil rigs in Curacao and the experience of a fellow passenger who was required to remove his beard. Philip, like Hall, becomes a primary school teacher. With its very simple episodic construction, the

play impresses as dramatised diary excerpts of Hall's outward voyage and early life in New Zealand.

But, as well as recalling such surface details, Hall delves more deeply into what was clearly an underlying cultural dislocation, a separation from his roots. The emotional effects of this transplantation were deeply, and probably permanently, disturbing. The anguish of the immigrant is expressed movingly by several of the characters, especially by Shirley, who is the most desperately homesick of all. While the welcoming New Zealand couple, John and Glenda (surely based on Ian and Freda MacGregor who 'were to become my New Zealand parents' – *bums* 47) certainly present some New Zealanders as being positive and supportive, a negative and patronising criticism of the surface of New Zealand life prevails, and could easily have been galling for New Zealand audiences in 1981. The play would almost certainly have no audience now.

While some details in the play seem superficial, even trivial, others movingly describe personal suffering. Shirley's homesickness echoes the experience of Hall's father, who, like Shirley and so many other immigrants unable to cope with the stress of change, chose to return to Great Britain after a short time in New Zealand. Hall's own agony of homesickness hovers steadily in the background:

At lunchtimes a few of us from the State Fire would sometimes go down to the wharves where we could wander freely and gaze at the *Dominion Monarch*, the *Rangitoto* and the *Rangitane* and envy those who were going back on them. Sometimes the two years stretched ahead like a sentence. (51)

This repeats Shirley's heart-rending speech in Scene 21.

Every lunch hour I come here....I walk along the wharves, staring at the ships that are bound for London....I'd give anything to be on one of them. I am so homesick....They should have warned us. What it would be like....I hate it. I wish I didn't, but I hate it. I long for England as I've never longed for anything in my life. Two years....I can't last here two years. (*Prisoners* 27-28)

Shirley simply can't find the soil to put down roots and finally leaves Ken to return to England alone. So, despite the revue structure, the mood of the play is not one of sustained comedy. The final words of the three married couples, who, with Philip, are

the central characters, reveal the disturbing trauma suffered by English immigrants such as Hall and, later, his parents. While he apparently did not feel as desperate as Shirley, one is left wondering if he does not share Vera's confession, 'I've never really got used to it - not really.' (*Prisoners* 70)

The characters in *Prisoners of Mother England* came to New Zealand to start a new and better life. However, their troubled state raises a serious question. Is the quest for material security and comfort what life is about? Maureen is looking for more than a comfortable, safe haven; she is intent on finding opportunities here that would not have been available to her in Great Britain. But the 'better life', Hall suggests, is better only in material terms. Maureen echoes Fairburn's charge, in 'I'm Older Than You, Please Listen', that New Zealanders are seduced by comfort and security rather than by challenge. For her, the Marxist dream of an egalitarian society, in which all can achieve and share a better life, has faded:

Maureen: Gerry - has it ever occurred to you that we're too well off - we're too comfortable?

Gerry: I don't know what you're talking about.

Maureen: That's what I'm afraid of. (66)

Stan and Vera sadly compromise between the comfort of their limited but secure resources here, and the dream of finding 'home':

Stan: We're quite comfortable... it's alright....

Vera: I've never really got used to it - not really. (70)

Theirs is the most depressing resolution - really happy neither in England, to which they have returned once, nor in New Zealand, they join the ranks of those disorientated immigrants who have found themselves permanently unsettled, not 'at home' in either place and now, trapped by their economic dependence, having to stay here. Stan says, 'I think New Zealand's a good place if you haven't got much of an income.' (70) They are words as truly sad as Vera's.

In the penultimate scene, Ken delivers one of Hall's very few long speeches. It is a nomination speech for a Labour electoral candidacy. Here, he explains what attracted

many British immigrants to this country, giving a snapshot of a colonial New Zealand as seen by a settler from 'Mother England.' But, during the course of the play, Britain's Duke of Edinburgh visits New Zealand and Hall notes, in a sharply observed scene, surely straight out of a lesson in his own Berhampore School classroom, that young New Zealanders were shedding the prevailing colonial reverence for the monarchy, and a school staffroom discussion about the current Vietnam war, hints at a national assertiveness that was to shortly find expression in the street riots of 1981. Hall says of the play that he wanted to

convey two points to the audience: what it was like for English people to come to New Zealand in the late 1950s; and to remind people what New Zealand was like then and, by implication, show how much things had changed. It was social history. (*bums* 137)

While deciding to 'remind people what New Zealand was like then' was a somewhat naive aim - after all New Zealanders had lived here all their lives and they knew a good deal more than Hall about 'what it was like then' - what Hall *could*, and does, do was to tell New Zealanders how they appeared to him then, and to describe the painful and deep dislocation felt by many English immigrants. The play is a dramatisation of the lives of those doomed to go back and forth between here and the country of origin, and it has verisimilitude because it is an expression of his own, and his father's homesickness. Hall retraces his own experiences, reliving some of his feelings at that traumatic time and in doing so, inevitably reveals himself as an outsider looking in. When writing the play, he was eager, he says, '...to begin on something quite different: my experiences as an immigrant to New Zealand', (137) but that sustained focus on his personal experience, places limits on the scope of the play. To be frank, it is doubtful if many New Zealanders in 1980 took a keen interest in the problems of 'Pommy' assimilation in the 1960s, and his illustration of 'how much things had changed' in this country went not much further than a browse through a photograph album of another time and place. Hall's surprise that some young members of the audiences in 1980 didn't know what a debutante was confirms this play as essentially a view of New Zealand from the perspective of a middle-class outsider who was qualified to chronicle the first impressions of English immigrants to this country but not to write its 'social history.'

The play enjoyed popular success but received a less positive critical response than had *Glide Time*, *Middle-Age Spread*, and *State of the Play*. Despite the fact that it is the first of his plays to explore a subject specific to this country, it marks a point at which, it seems, professional critics began to doubt that Hall had much to say about New Zealand that would stimulate professional debate, or reflective thought. To some extent their reaction was a consequence of his technique. McNaughton (*Drama* 149) agrees with Ian Fraser's judgement that 'Hall's use of revue techniques, in which sustained characterisation was not possible, was taking him back to his earlier style, [pre-*Glide Time*] with a risk of superficiality,' ('Flashing') However, Hall has remained loyal to revue, as I shall show in Chapter Six.

On his return to New Zealand after his first trip back to London in 1961, he enrolled at Wellington Teachers' College and Victoria University, beginning a life of university study which had been closed to him in England because of his insufficient academic achievement. Significantly, he seems to have been more affected by the personalities and teaching styles of his lecturers than the content of the lectures and texts. He is, as often, surprisingly candid. Of his study habits he writes,

after dinner, I would carefully rewrite all the lecture notes, sticking reinforcing rings round the lecture pad holes, place them lovingly into ringbinders. Did I go over the content, or think about it at all? Well no.... (*bums* 65)

His responses to English lectures and assignments -

I enjoyed reading *Middlemarch*, *Hard Times* and *Joseph Andrews* but never greatly cared about writing about them. Poetry was worse; great to read but very difficult to write about. (68)

are echoed by Glenys in *By Degrees*:

I could not write about poetry. I could read it, and enjoy it, but when it came to writing about it, well, I found it almost impossible. I didn't know the words to use for writing about it. (*Degrees* 25)

His time at Wellington Teachers' College and Victoria University he identifies as the happiest of his life. There, he became increasingly involved in writing for student

newspapers and student revues. The student life at college during those two years opened the way for the career to come. On graduating with a Bachelor's degree he taught at Berhampore primary school and, while teaching, continued writing and performing satirical revue sketches. He also added to his output, plays for the children in his classes and stories for the *School Journal*.

Hall left teaching after three years, interrupted by a year's study towards a Master's Degree, to devote himself to free-lance writing, aiming for success in the world of television. However, although he has had some success, for example, in series such as the satirical *Under the Circumstances*, he has struggled to establish himself both in this country and in Great Britain. It should be noted, however, that *Conjugal Rites* ran to two series in Great Britain. Although the quality of his work, mainly satirical sketches, secured him some contracts, Hall says that '...to the NZBC satire was almost as unacceptable as paedophilia.' (*bums* 96)

Finding himself in need of employment after the N.Z.B.C. terminated most locally produced television programmes, Hall applied for the position of Editor of the *School Journal*. He did not win that job but, shortly afterwards, accepted editorship of *Education*, the Department of Education's official magazine for teachers. Hall had had recent experience as a teachers' college student, and as a classroom teacher, and now, as Editor, found himself in close contact with teachers throughout the country, and the wider scope of New Zealand education.

During his time with the Education Department, Hall continued to write material for television and after leave of absence on a Queen Elizabeth 2 Arts Council award he decided to attempt a full-length play.

I will discuss *Glide Time* at some length in the following chapters. In that first play he put his London and Wellington experience of office life to work. Audiences delighted in its accuracy of observation, especially in Wellington where a large section of the population were, or had been, public servants themselves. It enjoyed a truly notable success which placed Hall firmly on the local theatre map. His second play proved to be very difficult to write. After the success of *Glide Time*, Hall was faced with a problem. 'I had to write another play, but what?' (132) Apart from office life, the only other

world with which he was familiar was that of schools so that was where he turned his attention.

Teachers, and references to the philosophy and practice of teaching, are to be found both in *Middle-Age Spread* and in the later plays where teachers and their world are seen as both depressed and depressing. Reg's teaching career has led him down a cul-de-sac as a teachers' college lecturer, with only the prospect of occasional affairs with students as consolation for his global discontent. Colin's account of the day's duties as deputy principal is funny only if one doesn't think too much about it. Judy, talking of the school, says that '...there's a terrible restlessness about the place.' Elizabeth agrees that children *are* restless these days but Judy replies, 'I meant among the staff. You know, everyone grabbing the *Gazette* as soon as it arrives....' (41-42) Anyone with any experience of teaching will recognise the voice of an author who knows the life of school staffrooms intimately. The bureaucracy of education is pilloried here as effectively as that of the Public Service in *Glide Time* and Ian Fraser notes that, as in his first play, 'once again, security without fulfilment is the key.' ('Hallmarked' 96) The title, as always with Hall, is not only catchy and memorable, but indicative of the essentials of the piece. All of the characters are, in fact, exhibiting the symptoms of middle age, when the gulf between expectations and probabilities becomes increasingly clear. They engage our empathy with what Thomson sees as '... the quieter recognition of the gap between hopes and achievements, of life's limitations, of a door closing upon possibilities as the years pass.' (90)

The play exposes the abrasions and half-healed wounds of the relationships between three couples who all yearn for a personal fulfilment which now, it seems, can only be a faint hope, and the predicament of their teenage children, so suddenly revealed in the closing minutes of the play, promises future frustrations and pain. At the point at which Colin has reached the position of leadership which was probably his goal as a young man, he finds himself tired and dispirited, without the energy and vision he once had, and essentially out of touch with, but sympathetic to, the children whose education he is charged with.

Though Hall found *Middle-Age Spread* much more difficult to write than *Glide Time* many critics have agreed that it is his finest play and it has been consistently successful, enjoying frequent revivals since its first production in 1977. Its complex construction is

possibly the result of Hall's turning to his television experience when facing the problems of handling a narrative dealing with past and present at the same time. While, in his first play, Hall incites us to laughter with, and sometimes at, a group of people in a specific workplace, in this second play, the focus of attention is on the daily domestic and professional lives of characters in whom the audience will recognise themselves at home - in dining-rooms and bedrooms - living domestic lives much the same as theirs. And in this more private world the characters reveal more of their inner, private and largely painful lives. In Ian Fraser's words:

*Middle-Age Spread* is sharper and more discomforting than its predecessor. It is also a play of greater depth... a play that is itself balanced between comedy and pathos, and that, as Roger Hall knows very well, is where most of us live. ('Slide' 26)

While Hall was a student at Wellington Teachers' College and Victoria University his father decided that he and Hall's mother would settle in New Zealand. Their stay here lasted only five weeks. Sidney Hall very quickly lost his confidence in a strange new land. In those weeks Hall describes his father becoming 'a demoralised, confused, shambling wreck' and says that during that time 'I went to lectures, glad to be out of the house.' (*bums* 72) On their return to London his parents' fortunes began a decline from which they never recovered.

In interviews given before the publication of *bums on seats* in 1997, Hall frequently revealed a good deal of its content, but he did not talk publicly about the significant shadow cast over his life by his father's gambling addiction until the late 1980s, after his mother's death. In two places in the autobiography he observes that his mother had to 'endure' his father's behaviour and, on news of his death, Hall says, 'I felt grief, guilt and relief in equal measure.' (175) Sidney Hall's clandestine gambling was a part of his life which caused anguish to himself, his wife, and his son. Apart from a brief reference to 'our mutual love,' (138) there is little feeling in the autobiography that father and son were very close, or that they ever talked seriously, or that Hall had deep feelings for him. It seems that he has found it difficult to forgive his father for the hardships that gambling caused his mother and himself.

Not surprisingly, the theme of problematic relationships between children and their fathers makes several appearances in the earlier plays. In *Glide Time* Jim comes to

physical blows with his teen-age son, who leaves home as a result. In *Middle-Age Spread* Judy decides, reluctantly, to return to her estranged husband because he is proving ineffective as father to their children, and the tenuous relationships which prevail between Reg, Isobel, and their son Stephen, and Jane and her parents, constitute the climactic issue of the play. George's children reveal his failure as a husband and father in *Fifty-Fifty*. In *Multiple Choice* the father has left his family, returning briefly, and ineffectually, to attempt - too late - to be a supportive parent. The father in Hall's reworking of Chekov's *Three Sisters* in *Dream of Sussex Downs*, is a disgraced and helpless alcoholic - although in that case he is, admittedly, a reworking of Chekov's character, Chebutykin.

Hall's obsession with this theme demands attention. It is most fully worked out in *State of the Play* and *Fifty-Fifty*. In the first of those two plays, the characters are attending a weekend drama course taught by Dingwall, a once highly successful playwright, whose muse has deserted him<sup>3</sup>. During this week-end course, Dingwall has all the members write about their fathers and then act out an episode from their remembered childhoods. The idea is remarkably like an exercise Hall devised for evening classes which he taught for Otago University Extension and which he describes in *bums on seats*:

Write three prose descriptions of your father. One to be your actual father and the other two, of course, to be made up. These to be read out and the rest of the class will try to guess which one is your real father... (*bums* 137)

McNaughton notes of *State of the Play*, '... Hall's use of autobiographical material derived from his own father intensifies the impression that the play is a personal statement about dramaturgy.' (*Drama* 147)

Brian, a flippant dentist, recalls his father, who is a representation of a man very like Hall's own father. Hall writes in the autobiography, 'Of course I was able to exploit my own father...'. (*bums* 138) In role as his father, Brian becomes carried away with his own excitement and finds himself - at the end of an interminable description of a funny film, very much like Hall senior's acting out of *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (138) - deserted by the others who have had enough and left. Brian stops suddenly. The stage

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<sup>3</sup> It is difficult not to associate Dingwall's state of mind with that which Hall experienced during the writing of *Middle-Age Spread*, when he suffered something approaching panic at the prospect of failure after having such a brilliant first success with *Glide Time*.

direction notes that he '*realises... that he has become exactly like his father.*' (*State* 61) An audience member who is familiar with Hall's autobiography may well infer that Brian's father is Sidney Hall and therefore, by implication, that Brian is a representation of Roger Hall. While there is something here of a set of Russian dolls, an audience is left feeling sympathy for the sons, both Brian and Hall.

The theme of paternity is dominant in all three scenes of *State of the Play* as the characters re-enact childhood episodes with their fathers. While the fathers they recreate are recollections of their own *biological* fathers, the exercise is Lacanian, exploring, as it does, the central significance of the father which Lacan identifies as 'the Name of the father', that is, a symbolic figure of alienating paternity which separates child and mother. The Lacanian implications are explored more explicitly in the Dracula sketch, in the last scene of which Dracula can be seen as a metaphor for Lacan's 'Name of the father,' physically, and violently, separating children from their biological mothers, until defeated by the intrusion of a transvestite, the fusion of both father and mother. While Hall doesn't convince that he knows very much about transvestites, the symbolic significance of Neil as transvestite<sup>4</sup> is central to the psychology of the play.

Richard Corballis notes that, of his plays, Hall likes *State of the Play* best. (91) It is not difficult to suspect that *State of the Play* concerns issues central to Hall's own 'self'. In that play he probes not only his personal narrative, fashioned from the pervasive presence of Sidney Hall, but also what Dingwall calls his nightmarish 'dark beast', (*State* 79) the implacable and detached observer who never laughs or cries, the face that is always quietly critical. Just whose face that is, is open to speculation. It may well be Hall's personification of the professional critics who he fears will reject him. It could be Hall's perception of his audience as the 'dark beast' which would not, for much longer, be satisfied with recountings of his own personal stories; that, at this time, Hall began to doubt his plays would continue to engage New Zealand audiences unless they had something to say that was about *them*. At the end of the play Dingwall, recognising that his career cannot be sustained, decides to opt for commercial success and reveals his plan to move into copywriting. It may be that Dingwall's 'dark beast'

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<sup>4</sup> In the Downstage production the actor playing Neil, found the role difficult to place. The director decided that he was homosexual rather than a transvestite and he was played that way. There was considerable critical argument at the time and it is recorded in the V.U.P edition where notes by Roger Hall, the director Anthony Taylor, David Carnegie and Ian Fraser are appended, along with a second version of the scene which is central to the psychology of the play.

represents Hall's concern that his future may similarly lie in meeting the commercial demands of the theatre.

Although *Glide Time* had been set in a Wellington Public Service office, with changes of place names and the addition of local references, it enjoyed successful seasons in Australia and Great Britain. Its office and the daily lives of its inhabitants are not specific to New Zealand bureaucracies; they could be found in any major city. Similarly *Middle-Age Spread* won the 1979 Society of West End Theatres 'Comedy of the Year' award because, with some minor rewrites, it fitted with relative ease into an English context. It, too, was located in a relatively anonymous setting but, again, with characters with whom New Zealand audiences could empathise, mainly because they were so real to Hall himself. In *State of the Play* Hall went further, exploring deeper regions of his 'self', revealing the degree to which his father had shaped it.

In the late 1970s, his father's steady decline became an increasing concern for Hall. It may be that in the shadow of that concern, he once more focused on fatherhood in *Fifty-Fifty*. Hall's fifth play, in which he recalls personal details of Sidney Hall as father and husband, is arguably his darkest. George's marriage has collapsed for reasons he doesn't understand. However, through his children, his son-in-law, and the prospective buyer of his flat, Hall reveals George as a self-centred and immature man who has never really understood his relationships with his wife or his children, especially with his son. It is his son who is most distressed by his father's lack of any professional engagement with his own career and by his torpor which has alienated his wife and children. A discussion in Scene 2 about George's office life might easily have taken place between Roger and Sidney Hall:

Michael: I don't know if I could stand life in an office.

George: Why on earth not?

Michael: Isn't it terribly boring?

George: Not particularly. Well yes. At times. (*Fifty* 32-33)

This conversation leads to further revelations that reflect Hall's own early life. Michael accuses his father of never having had any passions:

Michael: How would you describe your passions...your interests in life?

George: I'm interested in a lot of things.

Michael: Over the years, all I can remember you doing of an evening was falling asleep in front of the television.

George: That's 'cos I was tired. You try travelling in the rush hour every night.

Michael: There'd be an occasional flurry of excitement when the holiday brochures came out. Weekends were almost as bad. Saturdays up to town for shopping, and Sundays lolling round the house with the Sunday papers. Bang, there goes another week of high productivity. (33-34)

The shadow of Sidney Hall, the gambler, also lurks. George admits that the people in his office made life bearable by using office time for betting on horses or the pools (as does Jim in *Glide Time*) and after first denying that he himself did, finally admits to the pools.

With the significant omission of weekend visits to the theatre, this is a close reflection of the Hall household as described in *bums on seats*, as is the episode in Scene 4 where Barbara confronts her father with the reasons for her mother's having left him. She chides him for not playing his part in the running of the house and he replies that he went to work. It is clear that he sees that as his fair contribution to the household:

George: My mother did everything round the house. Everything. Even when my father was out of work. I was brought up that way. That was the way it was. Nobody saw anything wrong in it.

Barbara: Well they do now.

George: Well how was I supposed to know? All I know is that your mother changed.

Barbara: And you didn't. And that about says it all. (73-74)

The audience's sympathy in a performance of *Fifty-Fifty* will probably lie with George's wife, whose absent presence is strongly and sympathetically sustained throughout the play. (In fact his wife, Pamela, was an on-stage character in the first drafts.) Lacan's theory of the alienating father again underpins the play; George's egocentricity has separated mother and children. As the play progresses the outer George is steadily peeled away to expose his weak understanding of, or lack of real caring for, those closest to him. George's wife is happier without him. It appears that, like Pamela, Hall's mother, too, was happier after Hall's father's death. The play affected his mother deeply. In the autobiography Hall recalls her saying, 'It made me

feel my life has been a complete waste of time,' and he notes that this was, '...because George was so clearly based on my father.' (*bums* 171)

The final moments of *Fifty-Fifty* could be considered the most significant in all of Hall's oeuvre because they mark the drying of the autobiographical springs that had nourished the first five plays:

The flat was now empty of almost everything except for one chair which George sits on. In his hands is the list of things he is going to do to help cope with all his enforced spare time. As the doorbell rings marking the arrival of the new owner of the flat, George tears up the list ... and the lights fade on him. (171)

The lights fade, not only on George, but on Hall's father and on Hall's life before leaving England, the life which had been so influenced by Hall senior. Sidney Hall died in 1981, the year of *Fifty-Fifty* and there are no further references to fathers or excavations of Hall's life before his arrival in New Zealand. After *Fifty-Fifty* it would seem that Hall, whether deliberately or not, began looking further afield for inspiration, from sources outside his own personal experience. That widening scope of investigation brings with it a suspicion that the human heart beating in the earlier, more autobiographical, plays is not now so discernible. The characters who people the later plays are not people he has grown up with; they are not 'bone of his bone' and however entertainingly they are drawn and used, they seem products of a disinterested, somewhat jejune, eye. It is as if the Hall that had haunted the first five plays had ceased to be.

The fact is, of course, that the Hall of the early plays and the autobiography never existed in the way he is recalled. Mandel postulates that autobiography is, essentially, a discourse about something which has never happened in the way in which it is recounted. Life can only be lived in the present; in the transformation from *is* to *was*, we move from one reality to another *imagined* reality:

...the past never really existed; it has always been an illusion created by the symbolising activity of the mind. The past must be created afresh. (63)

McLeod noted in an early interview with Hall that 'Roger Hall's life and work are remarkable for the seamless way with which they connect ... he is the kind of hero he would write himself.' As she suggests, Hall is a written creation; the writers of autobiography *are* really writers of fiction in that, in writing about themselves, they are writing of a subject who does not exist now and who certainly did not exist then in the way they are presently recalled. Their life experiences are remembered in the light of present perceptions and understandings. In the process of selecting what to reveal and what to withhold, the 'I' which writers create, is a fictional one, and always under threat of ossification because the creation can become 'finished' and permanent.

Present understanding of the nature of the self grows from the work of Freud, Jung, Lacan *et al*, which developed a new perception of the present self as a series of continuous reconstructions from elements of the past, and the past self from elements of the present, so that the subject's relationship with its present and its past world is continuously adjusted and modified. The self appears to be self-directed, making its own decisions; that is, it is dynamic, changing consistently as its perceptions and responses alter. So who are autobiographers writing about? When they choose to write, a great deal of material must be disciplined into an ordered discourse which makes literary sense, whether it is 'true' or not. That is, the life being written must have a comprehensible narrative. That narrative is the subject's. Frederick Jameson, in discussing the subject's construction of its own narratives as a response to its changing perceptions, quotes Jurgen Habermas:

After all, Freud's 'talking cure' was, in itself, a narrative in which the patient's story gradually returned upon its protagonist to throw all the latter's notions of itself into a new light. (Jameson 214-5)

In the final count, the personal pronoun 'I' is not capable of precise identification because, as Roland Barthes postulated, it is 'always new, even if it is repeated'; it is not 'a stable sign.' (Barthes 163)

The autobiographer's 'I', therefore, whether in a dedicated autobiography or in a fiction, can only *pretend* to be a fixed entity with a fixed objective memory. In fact, memory

may well be only an image and not a reality at all. Cecily, Wilde's apparently unsophisticated country girl, understands this. When her governess questions the need for her diary because, 'Memory is the diary we all carry about with us,' Cecily's response is, 'Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened and couldn't possibly have happened.' (Wilde, 275) McAdam (121) similarly posits that we all create the stories we live by. These, our personal myths, constitute our identity, the 'self,' and are coloured by our emotional relationship with life. McAdams calls the characters that dominate our personal narratives, 'imagoes'. Developing Freud, he argues that imagoes are a personified and *idealised* concept of the self, often based on significant people in our lives, which are 'cast and recast as carefully crafted aspects of the self.' (123) Mandel reminds us that :

Writing an autobiography ratifies the form one has given to one's life. The ongoing activity of writing discloses the being's ratification of the ego's illusion of the past, thereby solidifying it. (64)

However, if we are to grow and develop these imagoes must be open to growth. 'Without openness our personal myths run the risk of becoming rigid, stagnant and brittle.' (McAdams 111)

If our personal myths become petrified with repetition, they may come to appear trivial, even irrelevant. In the constructed public persona which Hall presents, which I call the 'on stage' Hall, there is a sense of stasis, a sense that the past has been petrified into a *deliberate* construction, creating a chosen public image which has been 'carefully crafted,' drawing on the author's emotional as much as his rational recall of carefully selected events. The presence of that petrified Roger Hall is the one that seems to dominate the plays up to *Fifty-Fifty*. After Sidney Hall's death Hall's writing undergoes a marked change. The young Hall with his English life fades with the passing of the most formative influence on his life as a writer of English comedy. Hall's emotional recall of his 'English' life informs, and warms, his work up until the death of his father. But with his passing, the discourse of the plays changes sharply. Inspiration must come from new sources and a painful period of exploration ensues. From 1981 on, the plays arise out of a more particularly New Zealand life which is not as emotionally involving

as his recall of his English youth. The plays after *Fifty-Fifty*, with the exception of *Market Forces*, are lit by a less sympathetic light, showing them to be harder edged and more brittle. Audiences leaving performances of the first five plays went home almost certainly remembering moments of pathos that had touched them and made them thoughtful in the midst of laughter; in his later work the comedy is more astringent, cleverer perhaps, but with less heart.

## Chapter Four: Satire or comedy of manners? The early plays

Hall is known to most New Zealand theatre-goers as a writer of comedies and, of all his plays, the comedies have been the most successful.

Comedy has proved resistant to specific definition because of its complexity. A set of sub-sets, it ranges from romantic comedy to burlesque, from what summons a gentle, wry smile to that which provokes derisive and raucous laughter. In its various forms it includes romance, ridicule, hilarity, crudity and even aggression. Comedy can move us to laughter, or at least amusement, through the acute observation of social behaviour, the creation of vividly recognisable character, the virtuoso complications of plot, and language play.

It is commonly accepted, however, that a comedy is a work that generates laughter and has a happy ending. Phillip Mann offers a definition that sums up most theatre-goers' expectations:

In conventional comedy, the world of the drama is usually set to rights at the end of the play - no matter how improbably - and the good people triumph while the villains get their just rewards. (33-34)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* supplies the following definition: 'A stage play of a light and amusing character with a happy conclusion to its plot.' These two definitions, with their emphasis on happy endings, would exclude plays we accept as comedies, including Hall's *Middle-Age Spread* and *Fifty-Fifty*; these two plays illustrate that good comedy is frequently a complex amalgam of laughter and tears. The final act of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, for example, where old love gives way to new, with a mixture of regret and release, provides an example of a Viennese description of comedy as having one wet and one dry eye. Spike Hughes likewise speaks of 'the shadows of human sadness cast by the sunlight of comedy.' (259)

Comedy can summon both pleasure and pain: at times, laughter, at others, tears, occasionally at the same time. At one end of the continuum it may engage us on an intellectual level when the laughter is generated from ideas, as in the satire of Swift or Dario Fo, or brilliance of language, as in Wilde or Stoppard. At the other, it may

engage our emotions while demanding little thought, until sometimes we have to re-adjust our response. For example in *Twelfth Night*, our laughter at Malvolio's discomfort at Maria's hands dies quickly when the poor demented creature is released, and the world is not fully put to rights.

Similarly, to varying degrees, the endings of Hall's first five plays do not set the world to rights, and there is a lingering atmosphere of unease. The final moment of *Glide Time* is amusing enough, but it will precipitate an unpleasant encounter in the morning. The world is not set to rights at the conclusion of *Middle-Age Spread*, where the situation is too deeply disturbing to be resolved conveniently at the end of an evening's entertainment. Hall's message is, clearly, that there is no solution. Dingwall faces a bleak future and, similarly, there is no easy resolution for George's desolation at the end of *Fifty-Fifty*. Whether we laugh *at* characters and their situations, or *with* them, comedy may well be about serious concerns; it frequently has moral and philosophic implications, and happy endings are not guaranteed. Hall insists that all his plays are about serious matters, yet laughter is what his audience expect from him.

Comedy is clearly not easy to define and when the words 'comedy' and 'laughter' are used almost as if they were interchangeable, it becomes even more difficult. Laughter is a natural response to comedy. But what is it that makes us laugh?

Robert Storey suggests that 'laughter is an expression of the pleasure of mastery....' (432) Driven by self-interest, he argues, it is associated with mastery of the world and those around us and it originally had an aggressively self-protective purpose. Recurring definitions of comedy involve references to superiority and the triumph of one protagonist over another. In *Leviathan*, (145) Hobbes proposes that a 'sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others...' is central to humour. His argument is that life is a power struggle 'where every man is enemy to every man.'

Stephen Jay Gould turns to Darwin as the basis of a study of laughter:

Natural selection dictates that organisms act in their own self-interest. They know nothing of such abstract concepts as the good of the species. (261)

As the instinct of self-preservation caused early humans to see others as potential threats to their survival, he argues, all meetings were struggles for supremacy. The antagonistic baring of fangs when early homo sapiens met another of their own kind has survived, vestigially, as the smile - a signal of recognition. The shout of victory emitted when one triumphed over another, survives, less violently, in the human laugh. Theories that both the smile and the peal of laughter have aggressive, or at least assertive, sources, are the basis of many analyses of comedy, suggesting that from earliest times humour has expressed the pleasure of a superior originator out-witting, or ridiculing, a victim. In *Laughter*, Bergson, also, subscribes to the theory that comedy arises from that same superiority of subject over object.

The subject's technique can be subtle or light-hearted, as in comedy of manners, stinging in its criticism, as in satire, or even violent as in burlesque, such as in *Punch and Judy*. Whatever, the 'shout of victory' has evolved into the initiator's laughter of triumph over the butt of the joke. Hall mostly achieves his laughs in the one-line retorts of which he is a master. Those one-liners are often 'put-downs' and illustrate the theory of the triumph of a superior over a victim. The plays are rich in scenes of confrontation: Reg and Isobel, Elizabeth and Colin, Neil and Dingwall, Gen and Barry - all have some of their best lines when coming close to blows in self preservation. Audiences laugh but Corballis sees

an important connection between Hall's comedy and seriousness. The flippant one-liners are screens put up by the characters to hide their loneliness and suffering. (11)

Many examples of Hall's one-liners do alert us to the inner aloneness and pain of his characters. A typical example: in *Middle-Age Spread* Isobel is suffering from Reg's mental cruelty, but she has learned to fight back:

Reg: I always think a fondue is symbolic of life, don't you? Everyone jabbing away for the best bits.

Isobel: And him making sure he gets them. (*Middle-Age* 39)

We may laugh but Bergson argues that such a triumph will arouse laughter only if we are not emotionally involved with the victim, or if we are on the side of the initiator. That is, while being involved intellectually, we must remain emotionally dispassionate. Sustained satire requires that human sympathies and pity be suspended in what Bergson

identifies as 'anaesthesia of the heart'. (64) He argues that if we were to laugh at somebody for whom we feel pity or affection we would have to 'put our affection out of court and impose silence on our pity.' (63)

Satire's aim is, broadly, the correction of society. Hazlitt saw it drawing the distinction between 'what things are and what they ought to be,' and Meredith calls satire 'the ultimate civiliser,' but that traditional justification may have to admit, on occasion, to its use simply for the pleasure of wielding power. Certainly it is not always kindly and in its furthest reaches it is cruel. Of the satirist Meredith says,

people are ready to surrender themselves to witty thumps on the back, breast and sides; all except the head - and it is there that he aims. (3)

In ridiculing the foibles and absurdities of society, satirists assume superiority. Their aim is to persuade and to triumph over those who they perceive to be perpetrators of folly, deception, and corruption. In Jerome A Miller's words, 'satire is always anarchic, out to undermine the privileged position of those ruling in the name of the sacred order.' (219) Such has rarely been Hall's intention. Human sympathy regularly stands in the way of his satirical laughter because we do not have the indifference which Bergson claimed 'is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion'. Satire does not always resort to vigorous ridicule or scorn, however. Baldick's phrase 'tolerant amusement' is more frequently a description of Hall's satire (198) and Hodgson reminds us that 'satire censures and protests, but it also entertains.' (71)

Satire thrives in a political climate, but Hall has proved politically conservative, as was his family: '...We weren't a political family.... Morally we were middle of the road. We didn't drop any litter.' (Cohen 13)

Although the sting of satire does strike in occasional flashes in his work, more often Hall opts for caution; he parries, then withdraws from the fray. The audience is alerted to underlying serious themes but discussion is frequently diverted, and so avoided, with a gag. It's a technique of revue - to concentrate the audience's attention on an acutely made observation by making us laugh and then to pass on quickly. There is no opportunity to think more about the issue because the author races ahead; the next laugh is already on its way, so the barb is stored until we have time to reflect on it and our

laughter is the bookmark. Professional critics fairly charge that Hall's determination to make us laugh too often brushes aside serious thought. Even when his plays treat a serious subject he tends not to explore his themes at any depth.

His first play delivers occasional satirical barrages against the self-sustaining bureaucracy of the Public Service. In the second act of *Glide Time* Hugh says to Wally, 'Ah! Speaking of order forms. Could you bring some? We've run out of them.' The laughter which greets Wally's reply, 'You've got to order order forms on an order form' (47) arises from the audience's recognition of what Bergson identifies as 'something mechanical encrusted on the living.' (84) It is a derisory response to foolish bureaucratic rigidity but, while the satirist's aim is the head, in the early autobiographical plays the heart regularly gets in the way. Hall's thrusts do not often draw blood because he finds difficulty in divorcing himself from his sympathy with the humanity of his characters. They are authentic; he has known and worked with such people and his emotional involvement with them frequently produces moments when pathos leaves audiences closer to tears than to laughter. We are reluctant to laugh because of our sympathy with his characters' often unenviable existence and when we do laugh, it is because we are laughing *with* them.

Looking back twenty-five years later, Denis Welch still misunderstood (and underestimated) the play when he wrote '*Glide Time* started it all by poking fun at public servants.' ('King' 20) That was not Hall's purpose; he did ridicule the 'dinosaur' Public Service, but he spared the servants. His focus was as much on their endurance of empty working lives as on the inelasticity of bureaucracy. The first play was a major success because it encouraged New Zealanders to laugh at themselves, coping with a bureaucracy which they recognised as ridiculous. At its debut, *Glide Time* was described as satire by some professional critics, and also by theatre reviewers. However, Hall's satire is layered; while the Public Service is satirised, the characters mock themselves and each other and the inference is that the public servant's key to survival is laughter. As McNaughton points out,

Since almost all the characters acknowledge the absurdities of the bureaucracy to which they belong, the satire is largely self generating... it is both a satire on the Public Service and a comedy about the public servant's need to see his life as satirical. (144)

In a conversation with Iain MacDonald, Hall said of *Glide Time*,

Although it may have seemed very funny to the audience it is basically a serious play because it is about a bunch of people stuck in a job they don't particularly enjoy and half admitting to themselves that they are stuck. ('Knife' 14)

The satire of the play is muted because the characters *do* admit to themselves that they are 'stuck', and our sympathy is aroused. On Monday morning Hugh underlines the sad lack of any satisfying purpose in their lives when he says, 'Ah well. The day after tomorrow's Wednesday ... and the week's almost gone.' (16) They are trapped in a totally unrewarding daily round and because his characters laugh at themselves we become allies with them against bureaucracy. Bergson's opinion is that 'a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious.' (71)

Because they themselves are consciously aware of their plight, Hall's *Glide Time* characters finally move us to compassion rather than to laughter; it is easy to laugh at characters who are not, themselves, aware of their own situation, but it is not at all easy to laugh at those who are. Our laughter is deflected by our sympathy. But Bergson's theory is not irrefutable. Experience tells us that we frequently do laugh at ironic situations in which we laugh *with* characters who recognise their plight, but in laughing we respond also to the pain of the situation. As Thomson points out:

No other New Zealand plays have so consistently raised laughter, but when the exhilaration of so dense a medley of funny lines was past, what remained with audiences was a sense of human sympathy for each character. (90)

And Laurie Atkinson noted in a review of *Market Forces* that '*Glide Time* wasn't all laughs. There was, underlying the humour, a quiet desperation in the lives of the characters.' ('Trip' 10)

The following four plays inhabit the same country; the sharpness of satire is consistently softened by Hall's empathy with his characters, whom he seems reluctant to submit to ridicule. When satirists respond to their targets with a degree of sympathy, as Hall does, they are in trouble. It is then that their writing may come closer to comedy of manners which examines 'the validity of the surfaces behind which characters seek security and social acceptance.' (Hodgson 21) The early autobiographical plays are comedies of manners rather than satires because, after all the laughter Hall's audiences

left the theatre both thinking *and* feeling. The predominant technique is closer to what Millar calls teasing:

Teasing does not ignore... the mortal vulnerabilities of its victims, but it is possible for the teaser to locate these vulnerabilities precisely to celebrate them. (223)

Hall does locate vulnerabilities, and the laughter they generate frequently is the laughter of celebration rather than derision. Unlike satire, in teasing 'there is a kind of love that can only happen if our deepest vulnerabilities remain exposed.' (223) It is that affection that often dilutes the satire in the first five plays.

Hall's later work tends more to the acid, however, because of a lack of empathy with characters in whom he does not find so much to celebrate. In the two share club plays, for example, the interchanges between characters suggest an underlying animosity sometimes approaching cruelty. Bedroom conversations between Barry and Gen in *Conjugal Rites* are confrontational jousts, provoking uncomfortable audience laughter, and the patina of selfish and shallow relationships in *Take a Chance on Me* gives few opportunities to excite our sympathies. With the exception of *Market Forces*, which I will discuss in Chapter Seven, Hall's characters in the plays written after 1981 are viewed much more sardonically - in objective reflections of middle class life. In a climate which should foster accurate satire, no targets are really damaged because it is aimed indiscriminately, like buckshot. Those plays remain merely light entertainments.

The early autobiographical plays engage our hearts as often as our heads, probably because they also engaged Hall's heart, and while that may, in the opinion of professional critics, have limited the scope and impact of his work, they found more social substance to provoke discussion in those plays than they did in the later ones, where Hall is more interested in milking laughs.

Still, Howard McNaughton dismissed *Glide Time* as a light commercial success and concluded that, 'Hall is not writing literary or theatrical classics...' (*Drama*148) In 1979 Raymond Hawthorne also referred to Hall as 'a commercial phenomenon' and continued:

Hall has proved that we have a potential audience for plays on a domestic indigenous level and that is good to know. We have yet to see whether this country is going to

accept New Zealand writing... dealing with deeper themes which are not wrapped up in laughter, which are not wrapped up in gags. (Lloyd 13)

But Hall's intention stretched further than the writing of gags. While the public service that Hall satirised exists in quite a different guise today, the effective depiction of characters and their dramatic interplay in *Glide Time* still works because it offers us insights into the lives of characters with whom we recognise shared experience. With the exception of the Boss, the characters in the first five plays are not flat, stereotypical cut-outs with whom we share no common ground; they are people he knows and is familiar with, not just targets for satirical bullets.

The Boss, on the other hand, is a source of ridicule every time he appears because he is, in Bergson's terms, mechanistic, performing regular routine behaviours underlining the foolish futility of daily life in the Public Service which rules his life, so proving Bergson's contentions that:

The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine. (79)

Bergson postulated that comic automatism generates laughter because the mechanistic, inflexible regularity with which such individuals or groups of individuals behave, is incompatible with their present circumstances. He argued that, to cope with the tension generated by the continuously altering circumstances of daily life, it is necessary to develop what he called *elasticity*, which he defined as a 'constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body which enables us to adapt ourselves in consequence.' (72) If a character exhibits *inelasticity*, society is confronted with 'something that makes it uneasy', (72) something producing tension, and society's response is a return gesture to defuse the tension. That gesture is laughter. For example, we laugh at Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping up Appearances* because her rigid adherence to a snobbish code of 'correct' behaviour makes her ludicrous. Her inappropriate social rigidity makes her predictably and regularly ridiculous, and we feel superior; we cannot be emotionally involved with her and we laugh at her. In Bergson's terms, our laughter is the corrective which releases us from the underlying tension of finding ourselves faced with behaviour which is uncomfortable to the point of embarrassment. Hall provides frequent examples of such rigidity but sometimes, in the midst of laughter, alerts us to his character's distress.

A notable example occurs in the final minutes of *Middle-Age Spread* when Elizabeth farewells the guests as they leave the dinner party which has ended so disastrously:

Elizabeth: (*reflex hostess*) Thank you for coming – it's been a lovely... *she stops as she realises what she's saying.* (81)

The inappropriateness of the line is as funny as anything from Mrs Bucket, but now it is not so easy to laugh because we are emotionally involved with Elizabeth's personal domestic tragedy, no longer having in place Bergson's 'anaesthesia of the heart'.

While devoting considerable time to discussion of laughter arising from contemplation of the body, however, Bergson maintained that, 'the comic appeals to the intelligence pure and simple.' (150) For him, laughter arising from the intellectual manipulations of ideas and language is what constitutes the truly comic. Such is not the major source of Hall's laughter. In fact, ideas are rarely developed in any depth and there are very few lines in the plays which are memorable because of the quality of the writing as such. Felicity of language does not make a strong appeal to Hall. In an interview with Lee Matthews he said, 'I want to know what Celia is going to say, and what she's going to do, not how she looked or how the shrubbery dappled in the sunlight.... I skip the descriptive bits in novels.' (6)

A remark like this sits uncomfortably with a writer. His plays are not 'high comedy', which Sypher identifies as comedy using a sophisticated 'mechanism of language, the repartee that sharply levels drama and life to a sheen of verbal wit.' (20) An example of such 'sheen of ... wit' is Wilde's elegantly layered pun, 'As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte.' (253) Similarly the word 'perfect' in Chasuble's 'Charity dear Miss Prism, charity. We are none of us perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts,' (280) plays with the word in both the moral and purely physical senses, making us laugh while he develops character.

Hall's long experience in writing for, and acting in, revues, reveals itself in humour, which, in the style of revue, depends more on structured jokes than on comedy that is generated by situation or character. In an interview with Denis Welch, Cathy Downes noted that 'He knows how to tell a joke, knows how to set up the pay-off for a joke....' ('King' 20) Hall says of himself that he is a very good joke teller and suggests that

Joke telling is a supreme form of communication. Teachers should get children to tell jokes because they have to use language correctly. If you don't get it right, the joke doesn't work. [The interviewer is then treated to one of Hall's jokes.] How do you make a Scotch omelette? You borrow two eggs.' (Baskett J6)

The school-boy who liked making jokes in class is still at work. However, the jokes are frequently too comfortably familiar and so haven't always been appreciated, even by theatre critics. 'Comedy needs lots of good jokes. Hall has a few good ones but some are tired, old, and lack punch.' (Baskett J6) Gillian Anstey, reviewing a South African performance of *C'mon Black* concluded, 'One slight flaw in this one-man show is the preponderance of jokes, some of which have been around a while.' Matt Johnson writing of *Social Climbers* records that, 'there's... more than the occasional lame pun and plenty of gags old enough to be positively biblical.' (14) Clearly jokes that lack the 'sheen of verbal wit,' wear thin.

Professional critics would share Bergson's opinion that the truly comic appeals to the 'intelligence pure and simple'. Certainly, familiar jokes that "have been around for a while" are not the stuff of satire. Many of them, as we shall see in the following chapter relate to the functioning of the human body and its appetites. Baldick's definition of comedy of manners as having plots which revolve 'around intrigues of lust and greed, the self interested cynicism of the characters... masked by decorous pretence' views comedy of manners more cynically than Hodgson's, quoted earlier (40) and offers a reasonably acceptable description of Hall's later plays.

The literary interests of professional critics may well leave them finding insufficient substance to reward study, but Hall considers that the most pressing necessity for any playwright is to have a thorough understanding of the theatre craft that disguises craft. 'One thing I'm very hot on is that people do need to know the craft.... It's one thing to be talented and quite another to have the craft to put it to good use.' (Dungey 70)

In conversations with Denis Welch Hall said, 'To write anything that holds an audience for two hours is a bloody difficult thing to do. But I think it's like all good craft: it should seem effortless.' ('King' 21)

While professional critics may entertain Bergson's definition of the truly comic, Hall's dedicated audience clearly prefers comedy which finds its source in the body rather than the mind. They are not there for entertainment that 'appeals to the intellect pure and simple.' Hall has made it quite clear that he writes to meet the market, not for the professional critics who hope for something more intellectually engaging. He has written commercial plays which they cannot regard seriously, but to which his audience still flocks, because it enjoys his comedies of manners, with plots which revolve '...around intrigues of lust and greed, the self interested cynicism of the characters ... masked by decorous pretence.'

## Chapter Five: Savouring the joys of the physical

In the previous chapter I suggested that Hall is more adept at reflecting the surface detail of the physical world which his characters inhabit than at satirising the ideological basis of that world. Professional critics appear to have lost confidence in the playwright who offers little more than reflections of the lives of 'ordinary' New Zealanders without exploring the sociological and political forces which form the background to, and shape, those ordinary lives, and who focuses on the physical more than on the intellectual or ideological - on bodies rather than on minds.

Our bodies govern daily existence. Much of our ordinary life is spent attempting to satisfy the needs and appetites of the bodily cages we live in. In the first chapter of *Laughter*, Bergson examines the absurdities of those human bodies and their mechanical rigidity. He maintains that 'The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (79) and that 'We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing.' (97) When we perceive bodies as mechanisms, laughter is the inevitable result. Many writers, before and since Bergson, have seen the human body as comic because of its strangeness of appearance and behaviour which, like Pinocchio's nose, so frequently reveals our foibles and vulnerability. The mere appearance of the body can generate laughter. Charlie Chaplin's walk, Jimmy Durante's nose or Marty Feldman's cross-eyed leer all set audiences laughing before they said or did anything.

It is not only the physical behaviour of the human body that provides us with amusement. As I have shown in Chapter 4, laughter is also generated when rigidity of *mind* attempts to co-exist with the flexibility of the real world. When Lady Bracknell declares, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 'I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire, but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance' (303) or when Moliere's Doctor Bahis opines, in *L'Amour medicin*, that following the rules of medicine is more important than recovering through violating them, both provoke laughter which comes from their ludicrous commitment to an imposed, rigid set of principles in the face of the irregularity and unpredictability of reality.

In the same way, Hall often draws his comedy from contrasts between characters who are rigid in their thinking and behaviour and those who are flexible. When the Boss challenges Jim's understanding of glide time, Jim replies, 'We start late and finish early.' The Boss's response is one of near panic:

Boss: (Horried.) You mustn't say things like that. Even as a joke. (*Glide* 31)

More serious examples come from *Middle-Age Spread* where much of the comedy and, ultimately the tragedy, arises from Elizabeth's rigid determination that life will follow the 'accepted' social rules.

When Bergson talked of human bodies as mechanisms, however, he was talking not only of their rigid inflexibility of behaviour but also of the sheer physical inappropriateness of the human body which, with its inflexibilities and vulnerabilities, imprisons the human spirit. In Hall's output, the physical attributes of bodies contribute a good deal to the comedy. In *Glide Time*, Beryl's comfortable build, and the typists in the typing pool upstairs, their pert bosoms tightly encased in their sweaters, all attract the male gaze. When Hugh, in *Market Forces*, talks of a new woman friend he has made at the Vets' tennis club, she is described as having a 'lovely full figure and she wears very low tops. When she picks up a ball it's torture.' (*Forces* 4) In *Conjugal Rites*, Hall has Gen and Barry copulate only with words, climaxing in an orgasm, while actually lying perfectly still side by side in bed. The effect cleverly draws attention to the sexual relationship of two partners for whom words now stand in for the sexual passion they once had, and still long for; the effect proves sexually engrossing, both explicit and shocking. A good deal of comic mileage is made out of bosoms and penis sizes in *Social Climbers* and *The Share Club*.

Hall is clearly aware of the comic possibilities of the incongruous human body. That body would have us behave in ways which, as Miller notes, regularly betrays our attempts to transcend its functions which sustain but confine us. (218) In a television interview, (*Kaleidoscope*) Hall recalled a Jonathan Millar sketch in *Beyond the Fringe*, in which a passenger, finding himself alone in a railway compartment, surreptitiously sniffs his own arm pits. Hall claims that it is the recognition that we all share the same human condition in the same human bodies that brings people together to laugh. Words

for body parts and bodily functions also provide our most derogatory insults and violent expressions of anger.

The incongruity between our noblest aspirations and our basest physical lusts, between the spirit and the body, is the stuff of what Miller calls 'satiric irreverence' which, because it 'cuts so close to the bone, makes us realise that the very things we were determined to deny or overlook, expose us at the very points where we were most vulnerable.' (218) The body frequently stands between our 'nobler' selves and our intellectual energies and aspirations. The mind can frequently be squeezed out of the daily equation by the grossness of the body which imprisons it. Miller takes up Bergson's argument, pointing out that, on those occasions when the body is supposed to 'completely efface itself,' such as in moments of great solemnity, it lets us down with the evidence of the 'natural body functions which are mechanical and beyond our control. We, who have the highest hopes to achieve ultimate goodness cannot even control our own bowel movements.' (218) He argues that, in spite of our endeavours to conceal the body and its functions, 'the body never quite holds together.... no aerobic prevents its fated excretions or unbidden erections.' (218)

Critics may well consider that comedy in the theatre of satiric irreverence arising, as it does, from the grossness of the human body, diverts us from comedy which is ultimately more intellectually satisfying. But, however much polite society demands a facade of behaviour to conceal bodily functions, historically, the theatre has always provided a space where the erotic and the gross can be revealed, perused, and put up for laughter. Sypher notes that, while tragedy 'suppressed the sexual magic' in the Greek theatre, 'Comedy... kept in the foreground the erotic action.' (218) There is a licence to laugh at the crude in the theatre: the modern auditorium is conveniently darkened and things can be said and done which 'social discretion' would discourage outside. For example, Hall regularly uses the 'fated excretion' of urine frequently to point aspects of characters and their relationships, or even to further the action. Urination has been a recurring motif since *Glide Time*. There, Jim's thread-bare joke is, 'Just going upstairs to the... won't be a couple of shakes.' (34) At the opening of *Middle-Age Spread*, to alert us to the unease in their relationship, Hall uses Elizabeth's concern that Colin may have dripped on her newly-cleaned toilet floor. Male urination appears briefly to signpost the essential tension between Gen and Barry in *Conjugal Rites*, and an old male bar-room joke about female urination at different ages, crudely illustrated with

mouthfuls of beer, makes an uncomfortable appearance in *Social Climbers*. Male urination is the key to the detection of infidelity in *The Share Club*, when the imprints of two bare feet, 'facing the loo' are recorded in a freshly polyurethaned, and still sticky, bathroom floor.

Erotic comedy arises in the context of desire to satisfy our basic physical appetites. Before *Glide Time* there had been some openly sexual references in the work of New Zealand playwrights, such as Lord and Musaphia, and in late-night revue sketches at Downstage, some of which Hall himself wrote in conjunction with The Rubbishers and Musaphia. However, because they offended the contemporary sense of propriety, sexual references were not often overt in 1976, and the use of the word 'fuck' in *Glide Time* startled and delighted audiences in equal measure with its frisson of the shocking. Hall recalls a television interview with Angela D'Audney about the bedroom scene between Colin and Elizabeth, in which she observed that *Middle-Age Spread* 'seems to be obsessed with sex.' Hall, after an attempt to deny this, first charged the interview team with bias in their selection of the scene under discussion, but then said,

Anyway the country is obsessed by sex. People are either worried they're not getting enough of it, or even more worried that everyone else is getting more than they should. (*bums* 158)

In the plays, most sexual relationships are troubled affairs. Thomson considered that, 'In Hall's plays marital relations are not so much strained as moribund and people are rarely offensive or deliberately unpleasant to each other.' (91)

But even at the time of writing (in 1980) that was a challengeable statement.

Elizabeth's speech in Scene 5 of *Middle-Age Spread* is surely cruel. It is certainly deliberately unpleasant and offensive:

What on earth is there to welcome! ! You come in here, prance about with the crutch out of your pyjamas, get into bed sweating and puffing and sniffing - you read your ten pages of your wretched book - and THEN, twenty seconds later, I'm supposed to be shouting and moaning in ecstasy. (48-49)

This is not a comic scene. Of course, audiences laugh, but these two sad people engage our empathy because we recognise the anguish that underpins her outburst. In more

recent plays, where sex appears to be as much a tool of aggression as of affection, sexual innuendo has developed into a more outspoken source of laughter. His characters are frequently in conflict because of deep or unresolved difficulties in their relationships and sometimes their weapons are sexual. Perhaps the most unhappy of all the Hall relationships is that between Gen and Barry, who, in *Conjugal Rites*, are presented as people who have loved but who now seem more resentful of each other than affectionate, and whose disappointment in marriage has curdled into acid verbal cruelty. In a scene which is remarkably similar to that from *Middle-Age Spread* quoted above, the exchange between Barry and his wife, whom he suspects of having an affair with one of her senior colleagues, suggests a deeper antagonism than in the earlier play:

Gen: You think he's got my pants off, don't you!

Barry: It wouldn't surprise me.

(*silence*)

Barry: I take that back. It would surprise me.

Gen: (*She gets into bed, turns off her light and lies down.*) One thing I learned tonight. It's obvious I don't excite you any more.

Barry: I thought it was mutual. Sometimes you come to bed like Mary Queen of Scots approaching the scaffold.

Gen: Yes. Well. Her executioner made a hash of it too.

(*Rites 59*)

In the plays written in the 1980s and 1990s, discussions of sexual relations are frequent, and infidelity or the suspicion of it, which has been a recurring theme since *Glide Time*, becomes a standard feature. In *Conjugal Rites*, the confrontational relationship between Barry and Gen not only explores their own attitudes to sex and marital infidelity but also reflects the changing attitudes to sexual and, significantly, social and professional relationships between the sexes in a period when women were assuming senior positions and, sometimes, earning more than husbands who had traditionally thought of themselves as the bread winners. Hall observes this development, and presents women who are captains of their own destiny.

Hall's women often indulge a taste for ridiculing men in a way that suggests frustration, disillusionment and even anger. In a review of *Social Climbers*, Angie Farrow observes that Hall has, 'an uncanny ability to write for women ... Sample of dialogue, "size doesn't matter," says one character. "That's just a rumour spread by men with little dicks," says another...' ('Party' 47) The recognition of the changing roles of the sexes

in New Zealand society, and their impact on relationships, has been an interesting aspect in Hall's work, especially since *By Degrees*. The outspokenness of female characters such as any of the four in *By Degrees*, or Deb, in *The Book Club*, communicated strongly with women. 'I got more letters of appreciation for this [*By Degrees*] than for almost anything else I had written.' (bums 265) While Beryl could hold her own in the male-dominated world of the *Glide Time* office, she is not her own woman, as are Maureen, Zena or Gen. They represent a new generation of women whose knowing laughter Farrow noted in her review of *Social Climbers*. They are as likely to seduce as to be seduced - and they speak openly about sexual relationships with a frankness which would surprise *Glide Time*'s Beryl (although it is interesting to note that she, too, in *Market Forces*, has kept pace with the social emancipation of women.)

*Take a Chance on Me* treats sexual relationships with brash jibes. The play takes as its theme the loneliness of people whose partners have left them or have died. These are individuals who are passing through a middle-age in which established partnerships have collapsed just at the time when they might have expected stability and companionship. Hall indicates little genuine sympathy for their essentially tragic circumstances and while the characters in *Take a Chance on Me* are vulnerable, it is difficult to feel sympathy for them when they are already sorry for themselves.

Lorraine and Eleanor are both presented as hurt, but hard edged, women. Lorraine, in her introductory speech, tells us about her husband's death in straightforward terms. 'Donald was in the army. Super fit, always active. All that. Then he got cancer and died. And I must say took a bloody long time about it.' (*Chance* 5)

In her introduction, Eleanor, after telling us of her husband's sudden walk-out, says, 'Talk about a pre-emptive strike! If only I'd thought of it first!' (5)

Frequent sexual references in their searches to find another partner may suggest that Hall's characters are seeking little else than convenient sex, though there is also some attempt to reveal a lurking, deep-seated need for a partner to give purpose to their daily lives. While it may appear funny, the search for love through lust seems cheap, and likely to be futile. Indeed, this may be Hall's message, but the welter of sure-fire quips reminds one of Hawthorne's warning that the point can be lost when 'wrapped up in

gags'. What remains is the memory of bawdy humour rather than thoughts of human vulnerability.

There is a pervading climate of emptiness and inner hunger powerful enough to suspend rational judgement. In an early scene, Eleanor is discovered having sex with a courier behind a sofa in an office. The stage directions read,

*Sounds of woman having great sex. At the office. It finishes.*

After the male courier has picked up a 'bundle of clothes' and scuttled off, she asks,

How could I have done that! At the office. A bicycle courier. Those shaven legs I think, but even so. (24)

Her question suggests spontaneous desperation, but the sexual emphasis dominates the play, with an attendant suspicion that Hall's intention may simply be to make us laugh, even if those laughs are frequently insensitive or cruel. For example, while it might be thought that John's joke about Beryl's size in *Glide Time* ('Of course you're not fat, Beryl. Pull up a couple of chairs and sit down' - 18) was unfeeling, we were a long way from Brian's remark to Debbie in *Take a chance on me*:

Brian: On the phone you described yourself as 'Just a bit on the voluptuous side?'

Debbie: Yes?

Brian: Just a bit! You're fucking enormous! (*Take a Chance* 30)

Frank references to the physical body and its appetites have become more acceptable in New Zealand theatre despite, or perhaps because of, the Calvinist taboos which Elric Hooper has identified:

There is a fundamental Calvinism in New Zealand and I think that is one of the reasons that the growth of the theatre in this country is quite erratic - because of that ancient prejudice against pleasure. (Telephone Interview)

The current trend towards more open discussion of sexual behaviour may be a reaction to that long-term, Calvinist 'presbyterianising' of New Zealand. It seems that, in the last twenty years or so, the active, if suppressed, prurience, which Hall referred to in the conversation with d'Audney quoted earlier, has broken bounds, with less inhibited and

franker representation of sexual content on stage and screen. Hall could well claim that he is in tune with a steadily changing popular culture and that his plays accurately chronicle social change.

Is it that professional critics are conservative to a degree? Hall, in conversation with David Cohen said, 'When academic critics talk about humour needing to progress, I just wonder how far they have progressed.' (13) This veiled accusation begs the question of the meaning of progress. If Hall meant that they don't approve of a more liberated theatre which reflects a growing acceptance of sexual content or 'lower order' laughs, he would find his argument difficult to sustain. The professional critical acclaim for *Foreskin's Lament*, for example, would suggest that sexually crude language and nudity is quite acceptable in developing the author's argument when it is an integral component of that argument. They could also charge that Hall, in comparison with McGee, offers largely titillating sex which is gratuitous, not organically relevant to the burden of the play, and does not challenge, or contribute to, deeper understandings of an increasingly open New Zealand society.

In recent years, the western world has been refraining from imposing what has come to be termed 'high culture' on a 'low culture' majority. Such rigid cultural divisions are being rejected as elitist and judgemental. At the same time, however, Wylie Sypher reminds us that we *do* speak of 'high' and 'low' comedy, (or at least think in those terms) and argues that low comedy is more authentic than tragedy or high comedy because, 'it touches experience at more points.' (206) Hall frequently quotes Woody Allen who sees the purpose of comedy being to 'remind us that we are not alone.' The body is our shared 'given' and Hall uses it to generate comedy that 'touches experience' which middle New Zealand recognises. But Sypher further warns us that we are not fully human if we are not also "somehow uneasy" about the "nastiness" of the body. (208) In acknowledging that that nastiness is 'justly... thought human because of his [Man's] sense of what is "dirty"...', (208) Sypher claims we cross the 'threshold over which Man enters into the human condition,' when we recognise and accept it, the rest of the animal kingdom not having our 'sense of what is dirty.' While the extreme of obscenity is not a point at issue in Hall's plays, jokes which border on the overtly crude are. Sypher contends, that the degree to which a joke is a 'dirty joke' depends on

under exactly what co-efficient of stress a code of 'decency' breaks apart and allows the human being to fall steeply down to the recognition of his inalienable flesh. (208)

Judgement of the degree of stress which will cause 'a code of decency' to fall apart has proved Hall's caution or, perhaps, his sensitivity. He does embarrass his audience, but only to a point which it can accept, his caution governing the 'coefficient of stress.' Younger audiences, however, are quite comfortable with a degree of sexual frankness that the last generation could not have contemplated and they are turning to more sensational entertainment.

Hall has come some way to meeting changes in taste. The social climate of this country has changed remarkably during the time he has been writing. In the words of another one-time immigrant, Austin Mitchell, we are now, apparently, presenting as 'amateur hedonists'. (2002) At the beginning of a new century, as we grow towards more 'professional' hedonism, and when theatres are readily filled by plays and entertainments exploring the pleasures of vaginas and penises, Hall's appeal seems restricted to the audiences he seduced nearly thirty years ago. He has taken them along with him and they remain loyal but a young theatre audiences find his plays either irrelevant, as have professional critics before them, or who have never heard of him.

## Chapter Six: Paring down plot - the techniques of revue

Hall has had a long love affair with the comic revue sketch. In an age when the word 'passion' is overworked, it remains true to say that Hall has a passion for comedy and the comic sketch. He says of himself,

I write comedy because I love it. I love to watch it, I love to go to it, I love writing it. Very few people have the gift to write it, which I seem to have. (*Kaleidoscope*)

As we have seen, his earliest writing was for revues and it was in comic sketches that he had most of his first acting experience. The writing of comedy depends not only on the *what* and *how* but, crucially, as Hall points out, on *when*. Timing is central to revue sketches and in them he found a satisfying outlet for his 'gift'. The sketch demands lively and precisely timed dialogue which advances the action economically through initial smiles and giggles towards the major, climactic, laugh. Hall recalls watching *Glide Time* audiences: 'Sometimes I could hardly wait for the really big moments to occur. "Yes, yes," I'd be saying to myself, "if you think that's funny just wait for what's coming up in a few minutes."' (*bums* 129)

Hall's writing apprenticeship produced revue sketches for university revues, clubs, and theatres, leading to satirical sketches in such television programmes as *One in Five*, and *Under the Circumstances*, but it was while he was overseas on a Queen Elizabeth 2 Arts Council grant from the Department of Education that he saw full-length plays workshopped and praised which he felt he himself could have written. He determined to write a full length play. He had worked in offices, and he was a public servant, so it seemed natural to write a play set in a Public Service office. He began writing almost immediately and, significantly, of the first few resulting fragments he noted:

Characters, situations, plot; they hardly existed. It was dialogue, each piece leading to another piece. (*bums* 123)

From the outset he has been fascinated with pieces of dialogue which make audiences laugh. Dialogue, rather than content or form, is clearly what attracts him, and it is his ability to hit the audience's funny-bone at exactly the right moment that audiences enjoy. In the words of Angie Farrow, 'He knows where to find its erogenous zones, which tickle will make it laugh, how to pull its heart strings.' (47)

Hall is a meticulous craftsman and demands that his lines are delivered so that the audience's laugh comes at just the right moment. To ensure effective timing and pointing of lines, he keeps in touch with productions of his plays, in rehearsal, and sometimes during the run, and the audience's laughter is always what is important to him. Professional, as well as theatre critics, have acknowledged his mastery of the revue sketch with its string of gags, but John Clarke, in his foreword to *bums on seats*, noted further:

Roger's achievement rests in that not only did he succeed so brilliantly as a writer and performer in revue but he plotted a path, learned the skills and took the risks necessary to prove himself over longer distances. (*bums* 12)

Not everyone has agreed. There are those who consider his early grounding in revue has adversely affected his ability as a playwright to sustain those 'longer distances.' Such a critic is Elric Hooper:

One of the problems with Roger is that his initial experience was in revue. He wrote short sketches that ended up with a joke. He thinks in short spans. Structurally there are no long arches in his work, they tend to move from one sketch to another; they are mosaics of small revue sketches. (Telephone interview)

Anthony Taylor, while among the first to recognise the quality of *Glide Time* and *Middle-Age Spread*, has also been critical of the episodic nature of the plays and, in an interview with Kevin Isherwood, said,

I think his initial concept for what he does is always extremely good - they're quite clever ideas, but in the execution they are sloppy and don't show any craftsmanship at all. (*Kaleidoscope*)

While 'sloppy' is too harsh a judgement, it is frequently echoed in reviews from theatre critics. David Dowling, after commenting on "Dingwall's romantic schmaltz," concluded that *State of the Play* is a 'series of revue sketches, some tired running gags, and the name dropping that is a sure sign of a major talent working at half cock.' ("State" 10) Ralph McAllister said of *The Share Club*, 'The play suffers from its repetitious structure.' (10) Denis Welch noted a relationship with the episodic nature of television sitcom:

The usual Hall humour abounds and the play ambles along amiably enough, but very little happens. That kind of approach might work for a half-hour TV sitcom episode, in which quirky character traits provide ample sources of conflict, but a two-hour play needs something more....At times the play seems to stall, wondering where to go next. ("High" 40)

Dave Andrews similarly saw *Social Climbers* as a series of 'set pieces.' (F6)

In a word, what these critics seem to be missing is plot, which, with the notable exception of *Middle-Age Spread*, has not been one of Hall's major strengths, nor, one suspects, one of his major interests. Hall is interested in dialogue first, and then, character. His characters tend to be self-contained beings. They echo Hall's evocation of his somewhat isolated life as an only child: 'I didn't live in a community. You wouldn't know what the people up the road did for a living. Nor would you ask.' (McLeod 114) Their interactions rarely develop into sustained conversation, or erupt into argument, but when they do, Hall's dialogue can be passionate and convincing, as in the confrontation between Reg and Robert in Scene 7 of *Middle-Age Spread*.

However such interactions between characters are never brought to a satisfying point of resolution. Even in *Conjugal Rites*, with only two characters on a single set, the tension between this unhappy couple is regularly interrupted and defused, because Hall divides the play into sixteen quite separate sketches, some of them very brief. The play feels uncomfortably fragmented and Lisa Warrington noted of a Fortune production that the seventeen scene breaks broke up the continuity, which led her to suggest that the episodic structure 'belongs more properly to the television screen.' (23)

Although Hall gives the impression of thinking in short spans, he does create something approaching Hooper's 'structural arch' by employing a variety of techniques which, while not actually facilitating sustained plots with developing internal tensions, nevertheless supply sufficient structure on which to hang sketches. In the plays which lack an organic plot, the devices used to cobble sketches together have been various.

The structural arch is frequently established by a recurring motif or language play. In *Glide Time* examples include: the copy of *The Dominion* purloined daily by the boss, John's reply, 'No,' to the surprised 'Really?' routinely provoked by his nearly believable jokes, Beryl's daily, work-time only, telephone conversations with Mum, and, after Hall has teased his audience by with-holding it throughout the play, Hugh's final revelation of the English vernacular for 'copulation'. It is of interest that

McNaughton believes that 'structurally it is his finest play.' (*Drama* 147). In fact the basic plot of *Glide Time* is flimsy; the boss is retiring - who will get his job? The irony of the position being won by the idle and absent Max brings the contest to a wryly telling close and the final moments do constitute a satisfactory conclusion. However, the word 'plot' is an over-statement; it is little more than a connecting thread of occasional references to Jim's and Hugh's forlorn hopes of winning the position. Meanwhile, the running gags suggest a continuity which is more factitious than real, but the regular appearance of the disembodied hands delivering mail through a hole in the wall has rather more substance: beginning as a joke, it develops a Pinteresque menace as the hands come to symbolise anonymous bureaucracy.

*Glide Time* is a construction whose building blocks are revue sketches of the sort that Hall had been producing successfully for several years. The opening sequence (*Glide* 13-19) is a sketch set in the drab public service office on a bleak Wellington Monday morning, and each following sketch traces the action through different periods of the day, and each day of the week. The working environment of these characters is swiftly established by the stage set, furnished with its familiar office icons, and the audience is quickly involved through rapid references to familiar details of their world. As in revue, he demonstrates the importance of economy of exposition, setting up his situations, introducing his characters and involving his audience quickly, without fuss. The opening, 'Wellington, I hate you!' is swift and startling. In less than ten minutes he has filled the stage with all but one of his characters and supplied enough information about each one to engage the audience, while delaying the appearance of the boss until the contrast between the mechanistic rigidity of the public service and the lively interplay of the office team will have maximum impact.

In the first few minutes Hall tilts at the Wellington weather, the 1970s petrol crisis, the 'do-it-yourself' New Zealand suburban week-end, bottle drives, the slow work habits of New Zealand wharf labourers and the exaggeratedly rosy tourist information given to English immigrants at New Zealand House in London. Already the audience is informed and laughing at the recognition of their own prejudices and the received jokes of their lives. There are other sketches in Act 1, such as the conversation between the Boss and Jim about the nature of glide time. (31-32) Similarly, the opening of Act 2 (37-39), down to the arrival of the pay packets, would stand alone as a sketch about women's liberation.

But it can also be argued that the problem with *Glide Time*, is not that there is not enough plot, but that there are too many stories which do not develop into plot because there is insufficient causation of the kind that distinguishes plot from mere 'story'. The many peripheral stories are like snippets of people's lives overheard on the bus or at a neighbouring table in a cafe; they are wisps of plot occurring off-stage and the lack of dramatic development which would give shape to those side stories leaves us with our curiosity aroused but not satisfied. At one and the same time there is too much from the point of view of the whole, and not enough from the point of view of its parts. But while the episodic construction of the play tends to inhibit character growth, Hall's characters in the early plays are still more engagingly real and fully drawn than are those after *Fifty-Fifty*. In the first play, Hall, while keeping his sights steadily on the next laugh, still offers enough to sustain a focus on the pathos of these characters living their routine lives behind bureaucratic bars.

In the absence of strong plots, characters are developed just far enough to arouse interest and establish belief and to supply opportunities for comic dialogue. The treatment of off-stage stories is too shallow to involve us and their solutions are too easy to seem real. The resolution of Jim's relationship with his son and his girl-friend, for example, is simply a piece of theatrical machinery, and while Lisa Warrington considers *Conjugal Rites* to be 'vintage Roger Hall,' of the sudden death of Barry's friend, Leo, which precipitates the conclusion of *Conjugal Rites*, she notes that:

The resolution is a little too 'convenient', occurring, as it does, through the deus ex machina of a brief phone call.

In *Glide Time*, Hugh and Beryl are believable people on stage but an audience really has to accept their off-stage sexual relationship on trust (although Hall later makes it rather more convincing in *Market Forces*, where Hugh is the roué that he hadn't quite developed into in *Glide Time*.) It seems an unlikely dramatic contrivance. Painful or contentious episodes, such as the departure of George's wife and her subsequent affair with her young cello teacher, in *Fifty-Fifty*, the revelation of Jane's pregnancy in *Middle-Age Spread*, and the tragedy of Bronwen's desperate homesickness and her final return to England with her young son in *Glide Time*, are dealt with briefly, almost casually. 'It is remarkable how little happens in these plays, and how often the worst is

only reported....' (Thomson 90) It may be that Hall does not have the depth of emotional vocabulary to treat troubling issues on stage, or that he prefers not to become involved.

Like *Glide Time*, *State of the Play* is also built of revue sketches. In that play - *pace* Dowling - such a construction is more appropriate because the weekend drama class members are divided into groups to perform self-contained sketches, and so the fragmentation has dramatic validity in the context of the weekend workshop which supplies the over-all structure. These sketches are ordered so that they gather in emotional intensity, climaxing in the shock appearance of Neil as a transvestite in the final one. During rehearsals for the first production, the director and cast had misgivings about Hall's apparently insecure understanding of the nature of Neil's sexuality and about the climactic confrontation of Neil and Dingwall which leads to Dingwall's breakdown. Anthony Taylor was of the opinion that 'Neil is gay - he is not a transvestite'. (*State* 90) However, the 'fusion' of both Father and Mother in the final sketch, as David Carnegie acknowledges, 'effectively lends emphasis to the fundamental and thematic concerns of the play' (*State* 92), the significance of which I discussed in Chapter 3.

Professional critics expressed dissatisfaction with the revue format of Hall's next play, *Prisoners of Mother England*, which Thomson saw as '...little more than a string of loosely connected revue sketches.' (92). Facing the problem of effectively imposing unity on the first production of *Prisoners of Mother England* at Downstage, Anthony Taylor decided to connect scenes with slide interludes, and with songs such as *Haere Mai* and *Take Me Back to Dear old Blighty*, sung by the actors. The talk in theatre circles at that time was that the company was fearful of a failure unless the piece had more to hold it together. The introduced slides and music proved popular additions, despite Hall's initial resistance, but Harcourt still considered the play 'loose-linked' and 'episodic' ("Centre" 30) and Ian Fraser suggested that, in this play, his use of revue techniques was taking him back to his early style with a risk of superficiality. ("Flashing" 28)

Since 1981 Hall has continued to produce 'mosaics of small revue sketches'. (Hooper Telephone Interview) In his most experimental play, *The Rose*, the expressionist scenes are interspersed with sketches of New Zealand life. Each meeting of the share club, in

the play of that name, stands as a complete sketch of extended length, and in his most recent comedy, *Take a Chance on Me*, he has returned to an overtly episodic construction of sketches rather flimsily held together by a variety of techniques - music, slides, placards quick costume changes, and connecting narrations.

Structural arches are frequently constructed by with-holding, or planting, information which will be of dramatic significance later on. An example can be drawn from *Middle-Age Spread*. The story of teenagers Stephen and Jane bursts into the play just a few brief pages before the end, but, unsatisfactory as this is (because a subject of such high emotional impact has to be too hurriedly cleared up), it has been prepared for early in Scene I:

Colin: I say, is Jane OK? I tried her room just now and it was locked. She wouldn't answer.

Elizabeth: Just leave her. She's going through one of her anti moods. (14)

It is not until Scene 7 that the significance of this conversation is realised, tying the play's opening to the rapidly approaching climax. Such 'time bombs' are expertly placed and explode satisfyingly later, often much later. Like the author of a good 'whodunnit', Hall supplies enough fish-hooks to keep us concentrating and amused if we are listening alertly.

*Middle-Age Spread* offers the clearest evidence of Hall's ability to build a satisfying plot from a series of self-contained episodes. Its construction is possibly the result of Hall's drawing on his television experience when faced with the problems of handling past and present narrations simultaneously. The play has four scenes set at a dinner party in the present, interspersed with six which have occurred up to three months previously. The interspersed scenes take place either at Colin and Elizabeth's house or in Judy's flat and move steadily forward in time from mid-June to the evening of the dinner party in late August. In this way we progressively learn more about Colin's and Elizabeth's rather empty, a-sexual lives together, and about the touching relationship between Colin and Judy, whose mutually sympathetic understanding of each other's lives in tired and passionless marriages has drawn them into a brief affair. As the play progresses, the audience come to know more about Colin than the other characters on stage, and the progress towards the exposure of his affair is deftly built. The

manipulation of time makes conspirators of the audience as the play progresses, and the revelation of young Stephen's and Jane's sexual liaison on the same evening as the discovery of Colin's and Judy's affair, forms a subtle generational counterpoint.

Hall's narrative skill here gives pleasure as he explores the pathos of characters with whom we can empathise, even though none of them are blameless. The web of dysfunctional relationships, steadily crumbling scene by scene, contributes to the play's bleak climate; there is no happy ending in sight for any of the characters. The plot of *Middle-Age Spread* received a good deal of positive critical attention from both theatre and professional critics, Ian Gordon calling it 'a story recounted with narrative skill.' (6)

Structural unity is often suggested by Hall's use of properties, about which Hooper complained; 'They are a director's nightmare,' he said, recalling all the properties and furniture that had to be moved about on stage in *Fifty-Fifty*. (Telephone interview) In *Middle-Age Spread* self-contained scenes are linked by props: borrowed books, jackets, raincoats, pendants, all carefully placed to set up situations to come, or to remind the audience of previous scenes and there are moments which depend on details such as sherry glasses, wine bottles and collapsing shoulder-bags. The structure is also served by a satisfying web of connecting references. For example, in Scene 1, Elizabeth, who has invited Judy to the dinner party, describes her to Isobel before she arrives. Much later, in Scene 8, but earlier in time, when Colin is having his affair with Judy, Hall heightens the dramatic tension by having Elizabeth tell him she has rung Judy:

Colin:           (halts, alarmed.) Why? What about?  
Elizabeth:       To ask her to dinner.  
Colin:           Here?

At one stroke Hall has reminded us that we know more than Elizabeth, made us feel rather guilty about our enforced collusion, and has screwed up the tension just before the dinner party scene which ends the play.

Of the first five plays, it is only *Fifty-Fifty* that can claim such a well integrated plot as *Middle-Age Spread*. In that play, the collapse of George's life is traced over a period of

twenty four hours and the packing away of his material possessions supplies the 'long arch' that Hooper finds missing in other plays.<sup>1</sup> Hall wrote,

as each act begins, there are fewer and fewer things left in the flat until, at the end, there is almost nothing, leaving George alone on the stage. It was partly to suggest his own life being stripped bare but also to make the point that he was in the end alone. (*bums* 170)

George's story is one of loss, and during the play his material possessions are removed until all that remains is the Moorcroft vase, a symbol of his marriage. It is then smashed, to create a final metaphor for George's dehiscence. The destruction of that vase is a climactic shock which silences an audience. *Fifty-Fifty* is certainly the darkest of his plays. As in *Middle-Age Spread* there are enough inner conflicts to develop dramatic tension and *Fifty-Fifty* attracted positive professional critical comment.

In the twenty years since, Hall has gone on to demonstrate considerable versatility. He has proved an entertaining collaborator in musicals. Alister McDonald, in fact, declared that Hall's book for *Love off the Shelf* revealed him as 'exceeding in craft, wit and complexity ... better known Broadway musicals.' ("Hall Marks" 3) In the genre of the musical he has made contributions to such New Zealand icons as *Footrot Flats*, the popular romance industry of Mills and Boon in *Love off the Shelf*, and, in *Dirty Weekend*, this country's most popular leisure activity, gardening. But always the revue structure lurks beneath the surface.

*Hot Water*, Hall's only farce, briefly captured a popular audience. Sebastian Black, claiming that it was his best play up to that date, praised its 'sexual high jinks and murderous merriment.' (10) On the other hand, Stuart Devenie notes Hall's awkwardly episodic, sketch construction, and the lack of necessary 'plot' information needed to make logical connections between some scenes: 'We had to invent mimes to supply the audience with the information with which to make sense of subsequent scenes.' (Personal interview) Since its first success it seems to have disappeared from critical view; Hall himself makes only a passing reference to it in the autobiography.

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<sup>1</sup> Elric Hooper used the same technique to cope with the lack of stage action in *The Book Club*. There he had Deb progressively clear the bookcases which covered the three walls of the set, so that, by the end of the play, all the books had been packed into cartons. The bare bookcases were then a neat metaphor for the end of her hopes for romance in much the same way as George's empty flat conveys its message.

Considering his predilection for laughter, it seems strange that in a genre in which laughter is the prime, perhaps the only, aim of the playwright, *Hot Water* has not enjoyed lasting success. In both the positive and the pejorative sense, it is 'clever', rather too contrived, the farcical comings and goings leaving one feeling full but still hungry. That may give pause to consider the validity of Hall's insistence that in his work serious thought is as important an ingredient as is laughter. Significantly, in a conversation with Peggy Stelpflug, Hall declared that he would not return to farce. (Thesis)

*The Share Club*, which broke a four-year run of box-office failures, is again constructed from stand alone scenes. Each meeting of the share club is an extended sketch. Hall gets the play under weigh briskly. In the first scene, Victor, a dentist with an active libido, makes an attempt to set up an assignation with Zena, the wife of a financial executive:

Victor: Miles leads you a dull life, doesn't he.

Zena: Well ...

Victor: He doesn't appreciate you properly. I can tell. He's a fool, that's all I can say.  
(*Share 7*)

Victor's tired line of seduction establishes his character on the first page - he is another Hugh - and soon establishes Maureen's too, for, although Zena turns him down, when Victor repeats exactly the same tired speech to Maureen a few minutes later, she immediately suggests a day and time. Within two more pages all the characters, and what it is necessary to know about them, have been put in place and it is clear the play is going to be about relationships as much as investments. Its pace is slicker than in the early plays, moving somewhat ruthlessly from one laugh to the next, the characters exposing each other in one-liners.

The technique is still sure but it is hard to care about these characters or their situation because Hall doesn't 'get under their skin'. Victor, Charles and Agnes are little more than caricatures, as rigidly mechanical as the Boss in *Glide Time*. Again there are the connecting running gags, such as Garth's regular mishandling of the club's financial reports, and Warren's bungling 'economical' house renovations, which lead to the final surprise of the play, Garth's last line: 'Don't be stupid Warren. I wouldn't make the

same mistake twice,' which resolves the teasing mystery of who has had a romp with Maureen.

The widening search for subjects that will attract his audience has resulted in a variety of new approaches through which Hall has found solutions to the challenge of constructing plots. In 1981 he wrote *The Rose* which, while it still consisted of a series of revue sketches, deliberately turned its back on comedy of manners and the West End tradition with which he had grown up, looking to expressionism, and the theatre of Brecht. It is the play that clearly marks a move in new directions.

Hall explains the genesis of *The Rose* in *bums on seats*: 'One day at morning tea, a group of people were discussing Muldoon's style and its implications. It was enough to fire me up.' (188) His colleagues had been expressing growing concern at Muldoon's increasingly autocratic pronouncements, discussing them in terms of democracy and fascism. Hall tried to widen the focus to portray political universals rather than specific New Zealand issues.

The play speaks an entirely different theatrical language from his first five plays. There are two main characters, with only generic titles - the Man, who is a representation of a citizenry powerless in the face of a pseudo-paternal dictatorship, and the Leader, who is determined to establish a fascist dictatorship. In their solo scenes, the Man and the Leader speak directly to the audience in monologues from a bare, almost empty, stage. They present conflicting, clearly expressed arguments, both of which are convincing to a degree. Their scenes are interspersed with revue sketches of everyday domestic and social life in this country in which people demonstrate that the major problem in New Zealand is not fascism but apathy. The Man, it seems, is the only person who recognises the threat of the Leader's growing power. He notes 'the "Do Not Disturb" sign posted up years ago.' (Rose 14) The scenes with his wife, his in-laws, his neighbours, his work mates on the bus, and parents at the school P.T.A. meeting, are all realistic snap-shots of a population which is being lured into an unthinking, reactionary conservatism approaching fascism. The population around him gradually come to be convinced by the Leader's persuasions.

In the second half of the play Hall manipulates theatre conventions with varying degrees of success. The Man, observing in his community a growing admiration for the

Leader's strength and driving purpose, becomes obsessed and decides that the only way to arrest the power of the Leader is to kill him. In a straight-forward matter-of-fact way, he announces his decision. The mood develops into a kind of expressionist nightmare as the Man plans the details of the assassination. What follows are four rehearsals of an imagined killing, during which the Man steps out of the drama and adopts the role of director, working through the possible problems of getting close enough to murder the Leader, speaking to the other actors as actors and not as characters. As the difficulties in each attempt become clear, the Man halts the action in a freeze: 'Stop'. 'Again please. From the entrance' - and the audience are moved back into the stage drama. While this Brechtian alienation device is intriguing, the plethora of rehearsals weakens the impact of the final 'assassination.'. Is this just another run through? Hall's stage directions tell us that the Man '...plunges knife into Leader's chest and stomach. Blood pours out. Quick. Horrific.' (p.20) A typist cries out that he is dead. There is a blackout. But this explicit scene turns out to be yet another enactment of the Man's imagination. The Leader reappears suddenly, addressing the audience. An audience may well be confused at this point: where does the Man's world of imagination end and reality begin?

The Man and his wife appear, standing in separate spots, signifying their philosophical divide. She tells him that she is pleased she voted for the Leader. Is his life any different from what it was? she asks, and the Man admits that it isn't. In the next scene the Man, at four in the morning, tells us that, 'In a few hours it will all be over.' There then follows a replay of the opening breakfast scene and the Man sets off to assassinate the Leader, who enters his office, greets the Man, borrows his knife to trim a rose for his buttonhole and thus reveals himself, unmasked, as a man who loves roses. At this moment of epiphany the Man decides that, 'it's alright you know. Everything is alright.' But, as Laurie Atkinson pointed out, 'We know that everything is not alright. This turnabout in the Man's resolve is not clearly motivated.' (Atkinson 10)

The dramatic structure, using exploratory techniques which were interesting departures for Hall, presented problems for his audience, but the major one was the ambiguity of the ending. While acknowledging the impact of Hall's Brechtian structure, theatre critics of the three productions the play has achieved, expressed dissatisfaction with the political ambivalence of *The Rose*. It is not surprising that Mike Nicolaidi, while appreciating what he saw as '... highly subjective, grim ... with the impact of a political

cartoon - bold, spare and exaggeratedly descriptive,' noted that the audience left the theatre 'somewhat perplexed and bemused.' ("Thinking" 9)

The major structural problem with the play is that the two different dramatic genres and styles do not harmonise successfully. It uses elements of expressionism in the Man's and Leader's scenes, with alienation techniques, and symbols such as the mask, the knife and the rose; then, in scenes which depict the response of New Zealanders to the political skill of The Leader, Hall reverts to realism. While it is possible to use both styles side by side, here the combination tends to defuse the fearful sense of the darkening and inescapable world of nightmare with scenes which are sometimes not just real but distractingly comic, as in the P.T.A. meeting. Again, the play falls victim to Hall's predilection for the revue sketch.

Ultimately, the problems of its dramatic structure rise from its major philosophical fault line: the Man's liberal humanitarianism is clearly in conflict with his determination to kill. It is not possible to reconcile his liberal beliefs with his use of a knife. John Dawson noted this in a review of the Fortune production:

While an open end can produce fruitful speculation, this sudden collapse suggested either an atrophying of the Man's brain on slight pretext, or at least the catch 22 of the political humanist; that violence in defence of liberalism is a contradiction in terms. (15)

In a play inspired by intense political concern and frustration, Hall sets up a further problem for himself by avoiding commitment to one side of the argument or the other. He says, he has never felt that it is his role to adopt any particular stance; it was not a part of his upbringing:

We weren't a political family. We talked about politics during elections, but never political issues. Morally we were middle of the road. (*Cohen* 13)

The Man is a spokesman for liberal and humanitarian beliefs. The Leader presents the case for strong leadership which smacks of dictatorship. The compliance of New Zealand society, suggested in the realistic scenes, reveals the country's readiness to accept strong paternal (at the present moment maternal) leadership which has been an historical feature of New Zealand's political life. There is no judge at this debate. Two months after the first production, in Auckland, Hall expressed surprise that he had had

no political feedback (“Waiting” 11), but there is really nothing to respond to, whichever side of the argument one may espouse. Dave Andrews considered it a theatrical cop-out because, ‘All Hall does is to write down what a lot of people are saying and thinking.’ (F6) David Lawrence (2) was of the opinion that it ‘was almost unbelievably simple and unsubtle,’ with, ‘arguments that are all familiar.’ Bill Lennox found the ending to be ineffectual. (52)

In the autobiography Hall admits that the Leader is Robert Muldoon (189), whose political beliefs and strategies are all voiced by the Leader. Hall claims, however, that,

Although the play was about Muldoon, I didn't want the part of the Leader played as Muldoon ... I wanted the audience to recognise him, but to see also that it had a wider implication; that these sorts of things could happen with any government in any place at any time. (*bums* 189)

The use of Brechtian alienation techniques in *The Rose* was clearly an attempt to persuade the audience that his message transcended local, New Zealand, politics but in the autobiography he expresses his own deeply felt emotions about Muldoon, which generated the play: ‘When Muldoon was finally defeated in the 1984 election, I made Pip and Simon come out and watch as I danced in the street.’ (*bums* 189)

It may have been because they didn't find political polemic attractive that the public stayed away. Or perhaps the ambivalence of *The Rose* robbed it of Hall's intended impact. Possibly Hall's ultimate criticism of the public's self-seeking desire for security, and its political apathy, disconnected them. Certainly Philip Tremewan was of the opinion that Hall had seriously misjudged his audience:

The play became an indictment of the passionless people, that negative caricature of New Zealanders so tiresomely familiar in the forties and fifties.... This dour portrayal has always said more about the predicament of writers and artists than about the state of society, but for some years we have been free from the shackles of artistic struggle for sheer survival. The puritan, conformist, joyless stereotype belongs to writers of an earlier generation and if any further evidence were needed that it is not applicable to us, public reaction to the 1981 tour provided it. (78)

What is certain is that it portrays the Man to a large extent unwilling, finally, to swim against the tide, at a time when, out in the towns and cities of the country, New Zealanders were about to endure violence in the streets to fight for what they believed.

Hall contests the criticisms of the play's ending and claims that

[the only possible] alternative ending was that the angry man kills the leader instead of resuming his normal life. But it is more horrifying that he gives up, that all the fight goes out of him. (14)

He concludes his comments with yet another non-committal remark which reminds one of the person who used to be indecisive but now isn't so sure:

: 'People have said without the killing, the ending isn't dramatically strong, but if people really think about it I am not so sure.' ("Waiting" 14)

*The Rose* ends in a way that is typical of many of Hall's plays, which have generally satisfactory *dramatic* conclusions but a lack of *thematic* resolutions. To an extent *The Rose* is descriptive of the social and political climate of this country at the time, but it avoids the prescriptive, offering no possible solution. Hall made himself clear on this point to David Cohen: '...I don't like plays being prescribed.' ("Funny" 13) In an interview with Iona McNaughton he admitted that he is 'not a Greg McGee or a Reneé, writing about the social ills of New Zealand.' (19)

*The Rose* and the works that followed are attempts to solve the problem of plot. *Dream of Sussex Downs* was written as a result of seeing a production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at Theatre Corporate. Hall admires Chekhov and had been greatly impressed with Raymond Hawthorne's production. The sadness of the sisters, living out their lives isolated from their beloved Moscow, struck a chord with the expatriate Hall and he decided to rewrite the play about English immigrants from London suffering the same unhappiness of separation in Wellington:

*Three Sisters* seemed just right for me: more than one critic had used the word 'Chekhovian' when discussing *Middle-Age Spread ...* (bums 195)<sup>2</sup>

Hall might well have added that it was 'just right' because, here, he had a ready-made plot and characters. With one or two adjustments to the characters (dropping some, such as the servants and the two soldiers, and making Chebutykin father to the sisters), he follows Chekhov closely, finding appropriate New Zealand equivalents for major events, such as a vicious Wellington southerly storm in place of Chekhov's fire. However, Hall, himself, puts his finger on the major difficulty with such a refurbishment of a classic: 'The big problem was trying to write a play that would stand alone and still be enjoyable to someone who had no knowledge of *The Three Sisters*.' (bums 196) *Dream of Sussex Downs* did not stand alone and has had only two productions - one of them amateur.

Hall, apparently, has had a continuing desire to tell New Zealanders about their history. In 1986 he turned to 'a quirky history of New Zealand as seen entirely through speeches, questions and comments uttered in the House of Representatives' (bums 197) and lifted straight from Hansard. The fact is, sadly, that Hall finds it difficult to make the emotional connections with New Zealand's past; he confuses narration with history, and the result, *The Hansard Show*, is lacking in sustained interest. Again, this piece has no plot and is divided into sections with such titles as Questions in the House, Unparliamentary Language and Standing Orders. Each of these sections contains separate, free-standing episodes, not unlike revue sketches, drawn from speeches in the House, interspersed with excerpts of lively and often emotional exchanges between Members, all connected by a narration and songs written by John Drummond and Nigel Eastgate. Hall is of the opinion that the songs were witty, but those quoted in the autobiography are probably not the ones he was referring to. However interesting the idea of researching the transcriptions of business in the House of Representatives may have been, a loose construction of segments built of verbatim recitations from Hansard did not attract audiences. It is surprising that Hall would have imagined it would. History teachers did not bring their students as he had hoped; neither television nor

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<sup>2</sup> Howard McNaughton did not find the comparison so easy to accept. "It is ... not defensible that because Hall follows Merton Hodge in revitalising well made dramaturgy he should also be promptly compared with Chekhov ..." (McNaughton 148)

radio was interested. It has had two professional performances which 'never quite worked.' (*bums* 201)

Another work which did not succeed was a one-man piece inspired by Hall's affection for the lyric verse of Denis Glover, consisting entirely of Glover's words, in poetry and prose, gleaned from his autobiographical writing and his verse. Calling it *Mr Punch*, Hall 'couldn't believe the schools' lack of response.' (212) It appears that Hall does not always have effective antennae to sense public interest when he is not hunting comedy. However, *Mr. Punch* supplied Hall with an opportunity to express some opinions of academic critics, using Glover's words: '...a pack of bludgers who, when they're not on sabbatical, frank private letters at the university's expense ...' (*Mr. Punch* 24)

Hall wrote that after *Dream of Sussex Downs*, 'In box-office terms, I had had three failures in a row. Luckily for me, everyone...got very keen on the stock market.' (*bums* 201) Since that point in 1987, he has been successful in reuniting himself with his audience. By observing and listening carefully to what they are talking about, rather than exploiting his own experience and interests, he has found the material of every play since *The Share Club* and has subjected it to the same revue formula even when branching out into works for limited casts and solo performers.

The Glover piece never attracted a second production, but Hall continued the technique of having a character or characters address the audience directly. The genre had clearly appealed to him over a long period of time. On a visit to London in 1975 he had seen a production of *Kennedy's Children*, 'in which characters spoke not to each other, but directly to the audience. I was enormously impressed by it ...' (*bums* 120) The influence of that experience has had a marked and identifiable influence on his work: in plays from as early as *Prisoners of Mother England*, and as recently as *Take a Chance on Me*, characters have introduced themselves and engaged the audience directly. In his recent monologues, Hall has continued to use this technique effectively, talking directly to an audience, telling stories and making jokes without the restrictions imposed by the dramatic interaction of characters in a 'well made' plot. Such plays assist a playwright to solve a major plotting difficulty in that the character on stage can be, to an extent, a free agent. Of course, there must be shape and direction so these characters cannot be allowed to be randomly discursive, but, because there is no development of dramatic tension through character interplay, the playwright can summon up whatever he needs simply by having his character remember, imagine, or conjecture.

However, the writer is then dependent, to a marked degree, on the actor. An evening is a long time in the theatre. The writer must supply a script of interest and variety but it is ultimately the actor alone who must hold the attention of an audience: the one-man show requires a virtuoso. Perhaps this is why Hall chose to write *By Degrees*, his first play to use characters speaking only in monologues, for radio.

Hall's wife had studied as an adult and, as a teacher at Otago University, Hall himself had worked in the community of tertiary students. He has a personal understanding of the stresses and anxieties which so frequently beset older students returning to a life of study so divorced from their previous lives. *By Degrees* documents four women's attempts at this new life, from their first hesitant decisions to enrol at a university up to the point where they either graduate or feel that, 'I've got out of it what I wanted.'  
(*Degrees* 55)

The journey these women undertake changes their lives in a variety of ways. There is character growth in this piece as each woman describes her progress towards graduation with a Bachelor's degree, but as they develop confidence and look to new opportunities there are losses as well as gains. The four characters remain sealed off from each other, speaking directly only to the audience, forming no connection with the others and making no reference to what they say. 'Each of them would simply tell their story directly to the listener.' (*bums* 265) The result is simply the life stories of four women, each recounted as if the others were not present. These detailed accounts of four changing lives offer Hall opportunities to explore the growth of each character more straight-forwardly than he could in 'the well made play.' The radio broadcast of *By Degrees* was very well received, especially by women. With such a positive response Hall contemplated putting it on the stage. *Kennedy's Children* had worked back in the seventies, using the same structure; why not this? The stage version of *By Degrees* has enjoyed success since its Fortune debut, in spite of the opinion of the Herald critic, who, as Hall put it, inferred that the playwright 'had decided to have a night off, dismissing the play as a whole lot of speeches cobbled together.' (*bums* 266) It is true that it is a whole lot of speeches cobbled together, and professional critics will note the revue structure once again, but the sustained focus on its central theme lends it a satisfying unity despite its episodic construction.

There have been three full-length, solo plays since *By Degrees*. Two of these, *C'mon Black* and *You Gotta Be Joking*, are notable for the creation of what is surely Hall's most fully rounded and appealing character, Dickie Hart. He may promise to be only a superficial character constructed from the stereo-typical characteristics of the 'decent Kiwi bloke', but Hall uses this somewhat naive and shy man to explore many of the prejudices of Dickie's generation, perceptively. A retired 'cow-cocky' who loves his rugby, he has an earthy sense of humour but is uncomfortable when revealing his emotions. Audience laughter is the laughter of recognition; but Dickie's response to the plight of children in African black settlements, for example, provokes thoughtful silences. Dickie is clearly naive, but just as clearly, he is caring:

We went into their classrooms, crowded, some of them had to be taught outside, one classroom didn't have a roof at all; all the books were old. But keen as mustard ... There they were; they had bugger-all, yet they were happy and polite and eager ... it made me want to come home and give my boys a clobbering for wasting their secondary schooling ... They just mucked around like most of the others there. There it was a privilege. We've got it all haven't we: we've got it made. (31)

Of course, Dickie's claim that 'we've got it made,' again reveals a restricted view of a New Zealand where, though a comfortable middle-aged middle-class does live comfortably, there is growing poverty, social dislocation, and extremes of wealth which were, until quite recently, not so marked.

When they met Dickie again in *You Gotta Be Joking* audiences must have felt that they were meeting an old friend who holds the same values as did they. They were, as well, meeting another old friend, Grant Tilly, who, for audiences and for Hall, has become Dickie. The plot is very simple, a reversal of that of *C'mon Black*. This time it is Dickie's wife who has gone overseas, to get some 'culture' which he has little taste for, so he stays home and finds satisfying things to do. Again, the play is a construction of revue sketches which move from home and garden, to coaching a kid's rugby team, to an amateur theatrical production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. The recurrent, 'You gotta be joking,' each time Dickie is presented with a new challenge forms a tenuous connecting link between episodes.

Dickie, who still survives in some rural areas, represents the stereotypical farmer who belongs to the New Zealand of a fading, rural, past; an idealised portrait of a simple antipodean man of the land with his heart in the right place.

Experimentation with monologues and other forms has not entirely freed Hall from a commitment to the revue structure. They do, however, constitute innovative, and frequently interesting, attempts to find new subject matter. If a writer doesn't write about himself what does he write about? Hall's answer to this question has been to go out and find what people were talking about.

The basis of Hall's success, apart from an exceptional skill at comic dialogue, is an intelligent research of the local market. That Hall's research findings are sound is beyond dispute ... (McNaughton Drama 147-8)

While McNaughton's 'sound beyond dispute' was proved wrong during the 1980s, Hall has generally done very well out of being a 'chronicler of our times', and it was in that role that he wrote his hardest-hitting play, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

## Chapter Seven: In from the cold - Market Forces

Hall's focus on specifically New Zealand themes really began with *The Rose*. In his autobiography, Hall talks of that play in a chapter entitled 'Failures.' He uses the word in the context of the box office, but it could be argued that *The Rose* failed because of Hall's reluctance to articulate a message with conviction. As we have seen the Man suddenly loses his sense of outrage and, inexplicably, decides that 'everything is alright.' Such turning of fire brands into squibs suggests the intellectual timidity with which Hall has been charged by those who look to the theatre for sustained social analysis or, at least, an argument.

The years from 1981 until 1987 were a creatively troubled period in which Hall wandered in the desert, only occasionally finding manna. Then the sudden popular interest in the share market, at the height of the greedy eighties, provided material for two plays which dealt with the effects of the expanding and then the bursting of another South Sea Bubble and ending a period in which his new works hadn't appealed.

*The Share Club* was written at the suggestion of '...a Dunedin woman [who] phoned me to say that her share club had recorded in its minutes that "Roger Hall be asked to write a play about their club."' (bums 236-237) Hall continues, '*The Share Club* was a straight-out comedy which exposed folly and greed by covering the group's meetings over several weeks' (bums 237) and it enjoyed great popular success. Audiences recognised the kind of amateur avarice of share clubs similar to those to which they (and Hall himself) belonged, but they were almost certainly entertained as much by the titillation of the group's clumsy, extra-marital affairs as in its bungled stock market investments. And after the crash came *After the Crash*. Hall continued on from the previous play: 'Using the same characters from *The Share Club*, I had them trying to recover the money they had lost in shares ...' (237) While the characters of these two plays are two-dimensional, incapable of capturing the commitment of an audience because of their shallowness, Agnes, the most paper-thin of all the characters, arrests the audience with her opinion that:

... economic rationalism has 'turned us into a nation of shits.' If we don't hang on to being decent to each other, what have we got left? (*Crash* 66)

This is a sentiment that Hall develops more powerfully in *Market Forces*, which reveals an angry Roger Hall, aroused to fierce and sustained satire. In 1990 Hall insisted that he 'avoids political statements in his work' (Ferguson 2) giving as his reason his preference for 'sticking to the middle ground where he feels the real people are.' There had clearly been a change in his attitude by 1996, the year of *Market Forces*. Of all the plays since 1981 this is the richest. Hall is moved to a mixture of anger, pity, and political despair, perhaps because, reunited with characters who were his people, he felt the need to speak out with them, against corrupt bureaucracy.

In the early nineties New Zealanders were reaping the results of the economic experiments of Roger Douglas and the third Labour government whose privatisation policies had steadily polarised society into the wealthy and the impoverished. The result was intensifying wide-spread social discontent bordering on anger. By 1996 the effects of the restructuring of New Zealand society, modelled on the monetarist economic theories of market forces, were becoming clear, and Hall's topical *Market Forces* quickly captured the public's attention. It is true that he played on the popularity of his first characters from *Glide Time* by using them again,<sup>1</sup> but contrasting their lives now with their lives in the Public Service office of twenty years earlier was a very effective strategy for underlining the enormity of social change which had occurred since their first appearance in 1976. In this play Hall is clearly moved by the plight of his 'team'. In terms of characters and structure, *Market Forces* was ready to go.

Again, the plot is simple. The crippling fear of redundancy and the corrosive effects of the confidential negotiation of salaries and conditions, causing the break-down of collegial trust, dominate the play and are symbolised by the dreaded black liner bags. In the first scene the newly appointed manager, Brian Fraser, 'the new thingy, General Manager,' as Raewyn disparagingly calls him, joins the department after a successful career marketing frozen chickens and Brian announces the department's new policy:

The Government has already announced that it intends that the Department will become an SOE. As an SOE it will be required to make a profit. Some conditions hitherto enjoyed by employees will no longer be appropriate. Staff can anticipate changes: structural; internal; attitudinal. Some downsizing will be inevitable. (*Market* 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically enough, this was suggested to Hall by Saatchi and Saatchi who wanted to use them in commercials for a client. (*bums* 83)

The plot is the chronology of this process. Hall's commentary on the mindlessness of the new, commercially driven, bureaucracy, generates laughter easily through his most biting satire since *Middle-Age Spread*, but we are consistently reminded, also, of the unnecessary pain that is the result of undervaluing and dehumanising people's lives. Up until 1984 New Zealand had become increasingly strangled by the policies that Hall had reported in *The Rose*. The work force was losing skills and the value of the New Zealand dollar declined. America, Germany and Great Britain were putting in place de-regulation and privatisation policies. In the hands of Roger Douglas this country moved rapidly to implement such policies which equated wealth with progress. Profit was to be the engine of all activities of the state and, in areas where it did not actually sell outright to private corporations, it adopted their economic strategies. In the 1990s New Zealand seemed anxious to lead the world in the privatisation of government for profit. Brian makes this point clear:

Brian: This outfit's not here any more to dispense free advice or to do things because if we didn't no one else would. We are here to make money. And my masters... don't read the annual reports any more to see what kind of a job we're doing, they read the balance sheets.(45)

In a short time the country changed before its bewildered citizens' eyes, as a small but powerful group of industrialists, business tycoons and financiers influenced politicians who had so recently been voted into power by a majority of the country because it wanted a return to the socially responsive policies of earlier Labour governments:

From 1986 any state activity with a potentially commercial function was corporatised, placed in the hands of a government-appointed board of entrepreneurial directors and required to run as an equivalent to private sector business. A majority of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and other assets were later fully or partly privatised including three state banks and the trustee savings bank system, state insurance company, railways, the national airline, local transport, shipping telecommunications, electricity distribution, petroleum and natural gas reserves and refineries, forests, fisheries, hotels, housing mortgages, computing services and the Government Printing Office. (*Kelsey* i3)

The shock following what was seen as Labour's betrayal of its constituents of 1984, was profound. In a review of the first Circa production, Denis Welch observed that 'Hall has a wonderful ear for what worries the middle classes' (1996) and the main focus in this play *was* what was worrying the middle classes - the loss of good jobs, redundancy,

forced retirement, and the consequent loss of security. These were widespread fears held by middle New Zealand. However it was the working classes who suffered most as a result of user-pays philosophies. Medical treatment in hospitals was charged for; tertiary education was deemed to be a 'personal good' and charged for, and state rental housing costs rose to meet market demand. The rapid rise in unemployment led to growing social disruption. Between 1990 and 1995, the ratio of people living under the poverty line increased from one in seven to one in five and of those, the majority were Maori. However, in *Market Forces*, there is little indication that Hall has any interest or even awareness of the depth of poverty and desperation experienced out in the wider community where Pacific Islanders and Maori, especially, fell further down the economic ladder.

What first attracted Hall's satire was the ludicrous politics which replaced one silly bureaucracy with a sillier one, but in this play he analyses the effects of political implementation of privatisation and shows a much deeper involvement with his theme than in any of his plays since *Fifty-Fifty*.

What is notable about the resurgent *Glide Time* crew, in Mann's words, is that '... they stand up and fight for us, affirming values we understand, against forces we can not control.' (33) The satire is effective because, unlike the kind of satirical buckshot fired somewhat indiscriminantly in all directions in the preceding plays, it hits its target unerringly and regularly. The new characters - Brian, the heartless boss, and Julie, his equally heartless Human Resources Manager, both representatives of the politics of the 'new right' - are ridiculed in a sustained attack. There is a real satiric thrust, for example in the references to the new Chief Executive who will take up his position 'as soon as he returns from a sports shoe conference in Penang' (*Market* 1) and whose General Manager previously managed a frozen chicken business. A running gag also sustains acid jibes at acronyms for the Information Systems Department, which spell out, progressively, S.I.D. then S.O.D and finally D.O.S.I.

The *Glide Time* characters, on the other hand, are presented with a warmth which seemed to have evaporated in preceding plays such as *Conjugal Rites* and *After the Crash*. In a touching appearance, Raewyn, who like many unskilled workers has lost her job, returns to her old office colleagues, having been deserted by her husband, to

plead, 'Oh look, I hate to do this but could anyone buy a raffle. It's for the boys' school trip.' One of the most poignant moments in the play reveals the depth of her distress:

Raewyn: (*desperately to Brian*) Take me back. I'd do the job for half what I got before. Just give me my job back. (*to Brian*) Do you have any idea what its like? Do you know what kids' shoes cost? (86)

Raewyn has lost not only her financial security, but, more significantly her dignity. Reduced to begging she appeals to Brian in terms that he could not comprehend.

The play not only further revived Hall's popular reputation; it attracted some positive professional comment from long-silent professional critics. Phillip Mann considered it to be 'one of the most radical and intelligent plays I have seen for a long time. The play shows Hall at his best, with acute observation of character and situation, and trenchant wit.' (33)

It is Beryl who most often moves us. In what was originally the final scene she delivers a strong statement which is certainly an expression of what Hall's audience wholeheartedly endorsed. In a speech, regularly applauded, Beryl declares,

It doesn't have to be this way ... What is it for? You appoint extra people at big salaries and then take it off the people at the bottom. People at the top get more; people at the bottom get less. Your performance bonus? Sitting out there in the car park. It could have kept Raewyn on and two or three others. What do you need it for - you already get plenty. And if you do keep your job here, it's now a terrible place to work. No one trusts anyone. It's all paper-filling and cost-cutting and doing anything for a dollar. People are treated like dirt. And you, and all the people like you, you all think it's progress. (*Market* 69)

It is indicative of Hall's reluctance to write like the serious writer he claims to be, to sustain the impact of Beryl's righteous anger, and to endorse her message, that he then weakened what might have been as powerful a theatrical conclusion as any he had written. At the conclusion of what was the final scene, John returns to the office after everyone has left and finds the boss putting the dreaded bin liner-bags on each desk. Left alone on the stage, 'John looks around the office sadly. Fade in My Old Desk as John walks slowly towards the door.' It was a powerful, dramatically final, moment - a demonstration of Hall's mastery of his craft. But, when he attended a read-through for

the first production at Circa, the cast didn't like the ending which they found too bleak. It was felt that 'people would want to see the old team hit back in some way,' Hall says: 'I held out for quite a long time, but eventually succumbed.' (*bums* 268) That submission, once again, suggests his ambivalence or a reluctance to stand up and be counted. The second ending, in which John sabotages the computer network of the corporate, might satisfy popular taste, but it compromises a compelling message in the same way that Hall's apparent lack of commitment to a cause, compromised *The Rose*. Perhaps the final words of the revised ending, 'Fuck you, Brian.' (90) did express anger, but they don't adequately express the prevailing sense of desolation and loss.

Twenty years separate *Glide Time* and *Market Forces*, years that could be judged the most traumatic in New Zealand's recent history because so much was lost in such a short space of time and audiences were aware of that. In the words of Stephanie Johnson:

'*Market Forces* should be resurrected at intervals over the next 20 years or so, so that future generations can see what we once had and how we lost it.'"(42)

It could be argued that *Market Forces* is Hall's most committed New Zealand play - the one in which he comes closer to declaring political and social concerns than in any of the other plays. For these reasons it stands out, also, as the most moving of his works.

## Chapter Eight: Just looking, thank-you

In the first five plays I have suggested that Hall wrote what he knew, but in the more than twenty years following *Fifty-Fifty*, he has been opportunistic, writing more of what he knew *about*, turning his sights outward to research material of interest to his established audience. That process has not always produced winners. The misjudgements of audience interests in the five years between 1981 and 1986 may have been due to an inability to locate the essential 'Kiwi,' as had, by contrast, native satirists such as John Clarke or Ginette McDonald. That may account for Hall's recognising, too late, that calling a play *The Hansard Show* 'was a mistake, as a surprising number of people had no idea what *Hansard* was.' (*bums* 197) It is unlikely that a native New Zealand playwright would make such a mistake. Hall concludes, 'my enthusiasm far outweighed reality.' (*bums* 201) This difficulty he seems to have in sensing what lies under the surface of everyday New Zealand life may arise from a continuing homesickness which leaves him just outside the skin of this country. The resulting impression that he looks in from the outside, may be one of the factors that has put professional critics on their guard.

Hall seems to have sensed the critics' misgivings and moved to counter them by writing plays about serious topics that may concern or interest New Zealanders, such as *The Rose*, *Dream of Sussex Downs*, and *Multiple Choice* but these plays have enjoyed very few productions. While they do not pose any great intellectual challenge, they may yet have appeared too cerebral for an audience simply wanting to 'have a bit of a laugh' on their night out. They were not what they had come to expect of Roger Hall. It is notable that Hall adopted a fundamental change in tone when he wrote these serious plays; in essaying intellectual argument he tends to become didactic and, evidently, his audience found them unattractive,<sup>1</sup> while the professional critics, for other reasons, were unimpressed.

The reception given Hall's serious plays confirms that he fails to engage his audience when he is not being funny. His popular success has been the product of his talent for quick-fire comic dialogue, his theatre craft which builds on his revue experience, and his power of observation, rather than any deep social analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> While a student at Wellington Teachers' College, he decided that he wanted to be a lecturer and in the more serious plays, there is a sense that he is in that role as much as that of entertainer.

Hall quotes Woody Allen's complaint that 'comedy means you never get to sit at the top table. If you make people cry, you're considered a wonderful playwright. If you make people laugh, you're second division.' (*Dungey* 70) Hall has regularly combatted claims that he is 'just a writer of comedy.' In McNaughton's words, Hall 'is not writing literary or theatrical classics....' (*Drama* 148) Hall is right to claim that, comedy is not easy to write, but having 'the gift' to write it does not necessarily result in plays worth serious study.

*The Share Club*, in 1987, re-established his popular appeal, in large part because he returned to the revue-based comedy with which he had established his following, but his continuing use of revue structures have resulted in plays which are dramatically short of breath, moving from one relatively brief scene to the next. John Clarke's judgement that Hall has moved from sketch to full length play successfully can certainly be contested.

While some professional critics, like Mason, acknowledged and appreciated the craft of Hall's early plays, others, such as McNaughton, Hawthorne and Taylor, have been dismissive. Hawthorne complained that his substance was 'wrapped up in gags', while McNaughton, considers Hall's natural audience as being unable to see past their own, and Hall's, limited interests:

*Middle-Age Spread* is hilarious comedy to those who do not have to worry about below average incomes, domestic comfort, abortions or job security, people whose major concern is middle-age obesity: the New Zealand audience. (*Drama* 147)

Hall is quick to recognise what is currently interesting middle-class audiences, but, drawing on those topics, he makes his audience laugh without worrying them with seriously problematic issues. In drawing on topical issues, he follows an established English comic tradition. We are reminded of his alignment with that tradition in this assessment of Thomas Dekker's plays, which are

the results of vivid observation rather than of thorough or penetrating study. Wherever ... the specifically dramatic power differs from the specifically theatrical, he will be found to possess rather the gifts of the theatre - but to possess these abundantly... But were he no more than this, he would not have written at least five fine plays. (*Ellis-Fermor* 118.)

Writers of comedy for the English stage have, for centuries, made comic material from their contemporary world. Hall belongs to that line of English playwrights who have reflected the surface of everyday life without necessarily probing it in any depth. He comes from a line of theatre men who, writing from their wealth of personal stage experience, dramatised the world around them, using their 'gifts of the theatre'. What they found was not just trivia, of course; it was the vigorous shoulder-to-shoulder jostling of things serious and spiritual with rollicking good stage humour, bordering on the crude, which enabled Dekker to write 'at least five fine plays.' The blending of the sacred and the profane, which together constitute daily existence, has always been a feature of theatre, as in medieval miracle plays, where the appetites of the body and the soul shared companionable expression. Ellis-Fermor continues,

[Dekker's] comedy ... reflects clearly enough the circumscribed world of immediate events and persons, with momentary escapes never long maintained, but never quite abandoned, into a wider universe of the spirit. (118)

At its best, Hall's work demonstrates the same mix. A play like *After the Crash* takes its place in his output beside *Middle-Age Spread*, the one amusing us, largely, with observation of merely passing folly, the other drawing on reflection of universal human experience. He is a craftsman who can, like Dekker, even if only occasionally, turn observation into something richer.

Craftsmanship should not be dismissed lightly, but the professional critics would argue that it must serve something of value, and it is evident that they see his plays as ephemeral 'entertainments.' However, criticism of Hall's mere topicality is not always deserved. Like Dekker, he also as I have suggested, has 'momentary escapes into the universe of the spirit' where deeper themes are treated with insight and gravity, particularly in those first five plays which derive from Hall's personal experiences. For example, McNaughton's claim that the collapse of the Public Service Investment Society made *Glide Time* merely a period piece (*Drama* 148) was proved wrong when, in *Market Forces*, in 1996, Hall's characters returned to the stage, triumphantly alive, proving that *Glide Time* had been about more than just the ludicrous and grinding daily routines in the Public Service. The aching emptiness symptomatic of a lack of serious purpose or personal satisfaction is a resonating theme. The main characters are people whose genuine suffering arises from the same sources as our own and we respond to underlying universals, not just to the surface similarities between 'them' and 'us'.

While his early plays may initially have attracted audiences because they were superficially amusing, they are informed by themes sharing a commonality of deeper human experience. Writing of *Middle-Age Spread*, John Hale notes, 'Behind the characters we glimpse a nothingness. And it is our own nothingness.' (25) Through Dingwall's life in *State of the Play*, and George's in *Fifty-Fifty*, Hall explores themes of personal failure and the apprehension of empty and lonely futures - what has been called 'middle-age dread.'

McDonald notes that '[Hall's] plays repeatedly touch on marriage, politics and education.' (Hall of Mirrors 14 ) To these broad and universal themes can be added: cultural dislocation of the immigrant, lack of personal fulfilment, psychology of middle-age, family dysfunction, sex, infidelity and loneliness.

The sense of aloneness in Hall, hinted at in his account of his childhood, may explain his withdrawal from personal commitment. For example, at the end of *Middle-Age Spread*, Elizabeth's question, 'What do we do now?' receives an answer which is theatrically clever and which effectively avoids further discussion of the issue of abortion introduced in the last pages of the play. Hall introduces an issue for argument but then refuses to argue. This is the sort of evasion that irritates critics, although evasion in such a situation is only too natural - it is dramatically convincing - and that final line is funny in its situation. Moreover, while Hall may have spared the sensibilities of his audience from dwelling upon the issues of abortion, he does not spare it from the contemplation of the threatening emptiness of Colin's last words, 'What we do now, Elizabeth, is the dishes.' The message is clear: all that can be done is to keep moving on, living out our daily routine lives. A similarly bleak future faces both Dingwall and George. There are no promises of happy endings.

Does Hall step aside from the investigation of contentious issues to spare his audience or to spare himself? Is he the 'value-free' writer or is he simply theatrically astute enough to avoid offending his audience, present or potential? In a review of *Dream of Sussex Downs*, Robert-H Leek, although calling Hall 'indisputedly our finest comic playwright,' (9) chastises him for plays that 'finished up as comfortable, trouble-free diversions for audiences willing to cope with only the least demanding of entertainments.' (8) While there are clear exceptions as I have demonstrated in *State of the Play*, *Middle-Age Spread* and *Fifty-Fifty*, broadly, this may be fair criticism.

Of *Multiple Choice*, David Carnegie notes: 'as usual with Hall's plays neither virtue nor comedy is all on one side of the argument.' ("Recent" 9) At the end of that play Margie's final plea to the audience, 'taking Paul out of school was the best thing I ever did for him. It was. The best thing. You have to believe that,' could leave audiences with the suspicion that Margie is not as wholeheartedly convinced of the rightness of her actions as she would wish to be. Hall's apparent reluctance to engage in polemic can be unsatisfying. The ambivalent ending of *The Rose* effectively unravels what Hall has spent an hour knitting, leaving his audience bemused. And Hall's eventual acceptance of his original cast's wishes to alter the final moments of *Market Forces* weakens the play's underlying anguish.

He may hold the opinion that issues raised in his plays need not be resolved on the stage; that they are for his audience to grapple with. However, professional critics value the writer who has something to offer for discussion and they expect that 'something' to be clearly enunciated and argued. Even theatre critics have frequently ended reviews of Hall's plays with comments such as, 'this play won't wrestle with the big problems ...' (Andrews F6) and, 'a good night out for one and all, and no provocative issues to take home to your hottie.' (Cowan 14) While Hall understands the theatre well enough to know just how to end a play with a satisfying dramatic *conclusion*, he rarely provides a satisfying *resolution* of the issues he has touched on. The final curtain too frequently falls with an uncomfortable sense that we have moved no further forward since it went up, and audience conversation coming out of the theatre, is more likely to be about the fun of the performance than about ideas or issues.

The charge that Hall is intellectually timid may be valid. His intellectual acuity is still questioned, and that may be because of what appears to be a deep-seated ambivalence which, at times, approaches confusion and fails to achieve clarity of analysis. Ultimately the ambiguous endings, rising from the frailty, or absence, of intellectual argument, may well be as unsatisfactory to his audience as they are to the professional critics.

On the other hand, there is some validity in Hall's claim that it is the professional critics who have not progressed in their understanding if they equate quality only with intellectual analysis and unequivocal messages. Post-structuralist criticism does not require that literature should be analytical to be judged critically worthy, nor that it

should arrive at any particular conclusion. Withdrawing from the adoption of definitive stances is commensurate with a tidal shift in current literary criticism which claims that readers should come to their own decisions; that is their prerogative. Hall avoids prescriptive, moral stances. His answer to David Cohen's question, 'Are you a moralist?' expresses his ambivalence: 'I'm not sure that I moralise past the sense of having a certain sympathy with the people I write about.' (13) In this he can be compared, as he has been, with Chekhov. Elisaveta Fen, speaking of the plays of Chekhov, quotes Stanislavsky, in *My Life in Art*:

You feel you have nothing to say about them. The plot? The subject? You can explain them in a couple of words. Acting parts? Many are good, but none are striking enough to stimulate an ambitious actor.... (7)

Stanislavsky could easily have been speaking of Hall's work. Fen concludes:

The social significance of Chekhov's dramatic art is a vast theme.... What did he intend in presenting these characters and these situations? Why did he believe it was necessary 'to depict life as it is and people as they are'? Had he a moral lesson to teach? Where lay his own sympathies? These are the questions to which it is still possible to give varied and even contradictory answers. (34)

Such comparisons with Chekhov are strained; Chekhov reaches much deeper, educating his audience as well as entertaining them, but those same questions could still be asked of Hall. Has he a moral lesson to teach? Is he necessarily a lesser writer if he chooses not to teach moral lessons? Howard McNaughton thinks so. He has expressed disappointment with what he saw as Hall's lack of artistic growth. Clearly he expects playwrights to grow as thinkers and teachers:

Roger hasn't shown, in the last ten years, very much growth as a playwright. His last two plays [i.e. *The Share Club* and *After the Crash*] I don't think are substantially better than the plays he was writing in the mid-seventies. I like to see writers develop. I like to see writers move in new directions and develop new insights. I also think that playwrights have an obligation to educate their audience to some extent; I don't think Roger is helping New Zealand audiences to become more discerning. (*Kaleidoscope*)

Hall's consistent use of the techniques of the revue sketch has not encouraged that growth which McNaughton was hoping for. Although over thirty years have passed,

there is only a short journey between *Knickers, Knackers and Knipples*, Downstage's late-night revues of the 1960s, and his latest comedy *Take a Chance on Me*.

That comedy has been, unashamedly, Hall's favoured medium, and that he does not subject the frequently ephemeral substance of the plays to any rigorous intellectual analysis, are issues that lie at the heart of the disdain in which professional critics more recently appear to hold him. That word 'unashamedly' is used here because it reflects Hall's own stance about his art. He is clearly irritated at having to defend himself against critics who expect plays of more 'weight' from him. Talking with Lyn Ferguson before the debut of *Conjugal Rites* in Palmerston North, Hall made his position clear. Of professional critics he said, 'They want me to be what they want,' and continued, 'The basis of criticism should be what someone is, not what they should be.' He insists that he is determined 'not to intellectualise his work.' (*Ferguson 2*) Why should he? Despite his repeated claims that his plays are serious, to be serious has not been his primary intention, and rarely his achievement.

As real as the complaint that his plays are not sufficiently intellectual is the suspicion that, for all his ability to make us laugh, Hall is still a talented observer looking on, rather than one of us. He has been charged with being more of England than of New Zealand. He counters that he has done all his writing where he has chosen (like Hugh, in *Glide Time*) to live since 1959, and that he writes almost entirely about New Zealanders: of course he is a New Zealand writer! But in an interview with Iona McNaughton, Hall admitted:

that perhaps he hasn't got a New Zealand voice: perhaps it's that aspect his critics don't like. Even though he calls himself a New Zealand writer and has lived most of his life here, he says he can't shrug off his English background. (19)

Hall accepts that his plays are 'from the English tradition of Ayckbourn: middle-class, middle-aged theatre,' and that he is not a Greg McGee or a René writing of social ills.

It is the middle class I write about and by and large the audience for theatre is middle class. There doesn't seem to be any point in my trying to write about something else, like the plight of over-stayers. It's not my area. (31)

Even his later work has continued in that 'English tradition of Ayckbourn.' Mike Nicolaidi considers that:

there is no doubting that he strikes a nerve with the audience he ignited in the 1970s and carries forward with him today - a 'Rog's mob': they relate to the Englishness of his plays - the light touch of the kind of West End comedies of his youth. They have a beguiling amateur sheen, by which I mean that the audience can recognise themselves without any too worrying concerns about a deeper self-awareness. He doesn't get under their skin and make them itch, so it's a happy rather than a troubling experience that confirms them in their Englishness rather than any perplexing New Zealandness. (Nicolaidi, Personal interview)

It was a problem of 'perplexing New Zealandness' that Craig Harrison's<sup>2</sup> play, *Tomorrow Will Be a Lovely Day* (1974) addressed. With its specifically New Zealand theme, it contrasts markedly with Hall's 'Englishness'. In that play, two heavily armed Maori steal the Treaty of Waitangi from the National Library. The subject was timely in 1974. The Maori land issue was escalating, highlighted by protest movements, and it was to dominate the rest of the century. The play has faults, indicating that Harrison lacked the craft with which Hall was shortly to triumph in *Glide Time*, but Harrison's awareness of what was politically significant in his newly adopted country showed him, in this and his subsequent plays, to be a writer who had an interest in, and an understanding of, serious issues in New Zealand which took him beyond mere reflection of the surface of middle-class New Zealand life. Hall introduces a Maori character, Rangi, in *Hot Water* but he is presented first, as a caricature of a young Maori on probation, and then as a sophisticated young lawyer representative of a generation of Maori who are forcing an overdue review of New Zealand history. A flippant discussion of Maori-Pakeha land dealings occurs in the midst of a game of bridge; placing such an issue, bobbing like a cork, on the threshing waters of a farce, might seem cleverly metaphoric, but Hall is too anxious to keep the laughs coming for the point to be well made. Of Rangi, Hall says 'He meets every requirement of the stereotype Maori - at first' (*Hot Water* 7) but, in fact, Hall consistently presents both Maori and Pakeha, as represented by Rangi and Susie respectively, in stereotypical terms throughout. Black found the 'radical clichés' expressed by Susie and her Maori husband made the farce 'less sure footed' in its 'racial stereotyping', and noted Hall's

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<sup>2</sup> An English immigrant of about the same age as Hall, Harrison arrived here at about the same time from much the same class background.

tendency to 'describe, yet shy away from, more problematical areas'. (10) Rangi's sharply thought-provoking line, 'We like to give history lessons, too' (*Hot* 81), is rushed past, drowned by laughter at the next development.

Harrison was clearly interested in the implications of New Zealand's bicultural future in a way that Hall still isn't. Mason drew attention to Hall's monoculturalism in 1981:

My objection to Roger Hall as a New Zealand dramatist is this: I have found only one Maori reference in all four of his plays - when someone in *Prisoners of Mother England* gives someone else a present of paua jewellery. (*Landfall* 165)

It is doubtful that Mason would have felt his doubts allayed by *Hot Water* the following year. Since then there has been only one Maori character in Hall's plays, a sympathetically drawn, but atypical, young woman, reading for a degree as a second-chance adult student.

In all his work, the voice of the middle-class is consistently audible, but whether it belongs to a specifically *New Zealand* middle-class is arguable. To capture the 'voice' or 'spirit' of a people is not easy. In 1978, the *Evening Post* reported a speech made in the House of Representatives by the then Minister of the Arts, who declared that 'Mr Roger Hall was, with the possible exception of Bruce Mason, the first playwright to have captured the spirit of New Zealand.' Mason quotes that reference to 'the spirit of New Zealand' in a letter to the editor and questions it. 'I am sure that Mr Hall would be as interested as I to know what that might be.' ("And then" 2)

The dynamic of the 'national voice' remains elusive and difficult to define. While audiences, and many theatre critics, were delighted because, in his early plays, Hall reflected what they recognised as themselves on stage, his characters actually moved in worlds that were not really much different from the English ones in which Hall had grown up and worked. The characters, settings and content of *Glide Time*, *Middle-Age Spread* and *State of the Play*, with little adjustment, though usually under different titles, have survived transfer to theatre circuits including England, the USA, South Africa and Australia with relative ease. *Middle-Age Spread* has been produced in eight countries. *Fifty-Fifty* was written specifically for the English stage. A season of *Love off the Shelf* in Southampton, was reviewed in *The Times* and 'included the magic words, "This must surely go to the West End."' (*bums* 226) When the BBC talked

positively of screening a series based on *Conjugal Rites*, Hall wrote of his keen anticipation: 'I was going to write a comedy series for British Television.' (248) *Of By Degrees* he said, 'I think it is a terrific play and I'm hoping it will get to England.' (Colbert 40-41) He has admitted that English recognition has continued to be 'my ultimate dream.' (*bums* 153)

In all of this, the 'spirit of New Zealand' doesn't resonate strongly. Mike Nicolaidi claims that, 'he apparently doesn't have a stake in this country ... It is in this sense that his plays are politically conservative and, I hazard, reactionary.' He carries his Englishness with him. England is never far away when reading or listening to Roger Hall. A turn of phrase or a single word can remind us that he didn't grow up here. For example, speaking of the financial rewards which *Glide Time* had brought him, Hall said, 'It's a bit like winning the pools slowly, if you want some kind of definition.' (*Campbell* 15) New Zealanders know what he means, but the word 'pools' requires the momentary adjustment which confirms that Hall has not shrugged off his English background.

McNaughton notes that, in *The Bonds of Love*, Mason determined to deal to the 'smugness and complacency' of New Zealand audiences by thrusting uncomfortable truths in front of a cosy and, frankly self satisfied, colonial state of mind, and quotes Mason:

I must have a traditional background against which the local totem and taboo can be contrasted and, as it were, lit. (*Mason* 13)

In comparison, the traditional background of Hall's plays remains largely English and in the foreground are but the shadows of lurking local totems and taboos, rarely contrasted or lit for analytical scrutiny.

In 1988, when noting that New Zealand critics have not recognised or acknowledged Hall's standing as a New Zealand playwright, Nik Brown complained that the only critical award Hall has received has come from English critics. (*Kaleidoscope*) But the 1979 Comedy of the Year award for *Middle-Age Spread*, came from the Society of West End Theatres who were rewarding Hall for writing a successful West End comedy, not for writing a New Zealand play. Hall's reply to Kevin Isherwood's

question about the possibility of his returning to Great Britain was typically ambivalent: 'It would be both great and a shame ... a big fish in a small pond is great but it has its limitations.' (*Kaleidoscope*) Hall's major limitation as a New Zealand playwright is that, never really being able to escape his Englishness, he has largely written for a specific audience who are still culturally English. Leek notes the diminution of the original Chekhov in Hall's New Zealand relocation of *Three Sisters* in *Dream of Sussex Downs* where 'next to nothing [of Chekhov's play] has remained.' Mary's (Chekhov's Masha) greatest craving is for 'a tin of 'real' Nescafe!' and what is left of the young couple's brave dreams for the future of humankind? Continued access of dairy produce and frozen meat to the British market.' (10)

Professional critics have been cautious in claiming him as a New Zealander, writing distinctively for the New Zealand theatre, when Mason, Lord, Reneé, McGee, Duncum, Geary, and the many young Maori now writing, have written naturally of a life in New Zealand which Hall can never be part of.

Sadly, even those indigenous New Zealand writers receive diminishing professional attention. The ranks of professional critics have thinned in recent years. It may well be that, with only a small theatre-going population, theatre criticism attracts a smaller audience and consequently has not flourished in New Zealand as has literary criticism in other genres. Drama criticism appears to be in the doldrums. The decline in literary outlets for theatre criticism has also resulted in a loss of impetus for academic critics of drama. Some, such as *Act's Bulletin* and *Quote, Unquote*, have ceased publication, while others, such as *Australasian Drama Studies* and *Journal of New Zealand Literature* have published little theatre criticism in recent years.

In the first period of Hall's career, professional critics, with some cautions, acknowledged him as an artist, but since *Fifty-Fifty*, it seems, he has come to be thought of more as a commercial artist. In the world of letters the word 'commercial' is pejorative, implying a willingness to pander to popular and passing demand. Hall resents academic doubts about the quality of popular and, therefore, commercial works. As early as 1979, he made his opinion of playwrights who fail to make a living from the theatre, quite clear: 'If a writer doesn't heed the requirements of the commercial theatre, he shouldn't complain if he doesn't get a commercial return.' (Lloyd 13) His commercial success has even prompted unlikely suggestions, for example in

*Kaleidoscope*, that professional jealousy may be part of the mix of his critical neglect. On the whole, those professional critics writing are justified when they claim that Hall's work has become increasingly superficial and that he offers little intellectual stimulation. They consider the theatre to be a forum for the expanding of our understanding and the enrichment of our experience, rather than simply reflecting them for laughs. Their preferred theatre would be didactic, whereas Hall's is almost wholly mimetic.

But, say the critics, the recognition offered in a Hall or Simon play is reassuring. The laughter comes from a comfortable distance; it does not threaten even those who, ostensibly, are its targets ... In the West End it, seems, they do not ask for anything more. (Campbell 14)

With the exception of a handful of Hall's plays, professional critics have found his work to be of ephemeral interest only, not contributing to a growing New Zealand culture in the way the theatre needs to do. Nevertheless, it is not easy to overlook such a presence as Roger Hall in the history of New Zealand theatre.

Whether critically admired or not, Hall's plays remain the preferred fare of a significant section of New Zealand theatre audiences, to the exclusion of more challenging works which are apparently not absorbing enough to entice these audiences away. In an interview with Elizabeth O'Connor, Cathy Downes raised concern about the programming of New Zealand theatres. 'In terms of the emerging voice of New Zealand, ... it feels as if, apart from Maori work, we're staying pretty safe.' In reply to O'Connor's observation that a lot of people 'go to the theatre for a laugh and to a film to be made to think and feel,' Downes agreed:

Very scary! That's very scary. I keep hearing that too. And I suppose that the answer is to attract those ... audience-members in to the theatre by luring them in to something which isn't perhaps comedic, but is so absorbing ... that they are reawakened to the fact that the theatre can entertain us profoundly, in ways other than, as well as, comedy. (O'Connor 6)

That popular demand for comedy, and Hall's willingness to offer it regularly, has troubled professional critics but Hall tends to equate popular success with quality. Speaking of Neil Simon he said, 'He has the horrible curse, you see, of being the most popular playwright ever, so his plays can't be any good.' All the same, later in the same

interview, Hall said, 'The West End is very commercial. The new, *interesting* [my italics] plays get done elsewhere. At the Royal Court or the National.' (Campbell 51)

He continues to be tied to his English cultural roots and his plays are limited in scope because they are, by Hall's own admission, written in the 'West End tradition' for people like himself: 'I guess the audience is me most of the time. A middle-aged, middle-of-the-road sort of person ...' (Barnett 17) Hall's aim is to produce commercially successful plays and consequently he writes to meet his audience where they are. Recent works have demonstrated that he has kept his ear to the ground, writing dialogue that reflects the greater permissiveness of a changing society and, notably, the point of view of women in a more liberated New Zealand. However, it is difficult to deny that many of the plays struggle with flimsy constructions, and that, while Hall is capable of firing well aimed satirical shots, he is also satisfied with sketches not far removed from undergraduate revue.

In sum, whatever the reasons, the professional critics' neglect is as regrettable as it is understandable. That neglect, I suggest, has adversely affected his artistic growth. Creative artists need perceptive, informed and trustworthy touchstones who can challenge or validate their writing, so encouraging them to reflect on their work objectively. Replying to Kevin Isherwood's assertion that *The Share Club* and *After the Crash* were 'light-weight with no substance at all,' Hall appeared short of a reply: 'Perhaps they are insubstantial fluff and light-weight. There is a place for the light-weight play in the theatre...'. (*Kaleidoscope*) He then advanced the opinion that, while a regular diet of such plays may be unhealthy, the balanced theatre menu can well include plays of uncomplicated, commercial, laughter.

The question of the relative merits of art and commercial art should, finally, be relegated to the realm of angels dancing on their pin-heads. Hall's contention is that he attracts large audiences because, when they go to the theatre, people want 'a good night out.' For Hall's audiences, that means comedy, and that's what he gives them, but the pity is that the consequent neglect of the professional critics has left him without an artistic looking glass. While it is true that many of the plays, being 'light-weight' and 'insubstantial,' do not initiate discussion, and make little attempt at analysis or investigation, it is surely as difficult as it is unwise, to pretend that the playwright who, for over a quarter of a century, has dominated the New Zealand theatre scene, has no

continuing relevance. The rest cannot be silence. Hall attracted a large new audience into the theatre; they may well have 'come to scoff' but many have 'stayed to pray'. While it can certainly be argued that he has offered too little of lasting significance, it should be remembered that if the theatre wants to attract new audiences with sophisticated, thinking heads, it first needs to attract their accompanying bums on its seats. Over twenty-five years ago, Hall enticed new audiences into theatres in large numbers; that has been his major achievement. The money which his plays have brought into their box-offices has saved most of New Zealand's theatres from financial collapse more than once. What is more significant, as Murray Lynch, director of Downstage, points out, is that revenue from a popular season of a Roger Hall play has frequently been used to subsidise productions of quality plays by other, often first-time, writers for the theatre:

We began this year with a production of *Middle-Age Spread* because it's probably Hall's best play and it hasn't been seen in Wellington for some time. Also, because we have a play which we want to do later in the year, although it probably won't be commercial. Hall will cover that. (Personal Interview)

New Zealand professional theatre may well owe its very existence to Roger Hall, who, at a time when the future was insecure, ensured, not only its survival, but also a future for New Zealand playwrights. New Zealand's professional theatres' seasons now regularly offer New Zealand plays.

That Hall's middle-class, middle-age plays of predominantly English provenance have contributed to that happy state, directly and indirectly, should be acknowledged with gratitude. However, professional critics like McNaughton, claim that this country needs a theatre which will educate as well as entertain, - a theatre growing out of our own soil, speaking with its own voice to a new generation of thinking New Zealanders.

Cathy Downes, too, notes: 'I would like to see plays seriously and acutely addressing our contemporary society....we seem to be too frightened to, we're either sending ourselves up or still looking at our history ...' (O'Connor 6).

Downes could well be referring specifically to Hall, whose last two plays, *Take a Chance on Me* and *A Way of Life*, respectively, do just that. Downes wants plays to have something seriously perceptive to say. The tone of professional criticism of Hall's

work over the years leaves the impression that he has little to say, so there is, therefore, little to write about.

It may be that Hall eschews serious and acute comment on contemporary New Zealand society, not because he is 'too frightened' but because he is not able to, not having been shaped by a New Zealand childhood. When expressing his admiration of *The End of the Golden Weather* Hall noted that Mason describes 'a childhood unfamiliar to me' (*bums* 57). Hall's own English childhood and youth continue to resonate through his work with an accent which now sits uneasily in contemporary New Zealand. Whether that makes his plays less worthy than those of writers who were born into the culture of this country is a possible topic for a future debate.

Writing of culture and literature, Pierre Bourdieu noted that 'all critics declare not only their judgement of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art.' (36) Whether or not the professional critics have the right to judge Hall is a question about which he has expressed strong opinions. Perhaps he should be more concerned about the fact that the professional critics seem to have little or no interest in the 'monopoly of legitimate discourse' about the plays. Moreover the ranks of the generation who, since 1976, have been his devoted followers are now thinning and there seem to be few young bums on seats to see his work. The audience for the first plays understood their essentially English provenance and were comfortably unchallenged. New Zealand society has undergone profound changes in its view of itself and the world since then, but Roger Hall has continued to find his ideas from the surface details of New Zealand life and to treat them in a style which is still designed for London's West End.

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