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DRESSING FOR DINNER: RENÉE'S LITERARY
EXPLORATIONS OF THE CHANGING ROLES
AVAILABLE TO STRONG WOMEN IN NEW
ZEALAND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Renée has defined herself as a “lesbian feminist with socialist working class ideals.” Throughout her oeuvre she has explored the changing roles open to strong women who assume a leadership position in New Zealand society. Among these possibilities is the development of strong bonding between women which can lead to the formation of non-traditional family units. Accordingly, the study of her accessible plays and prose, organised in chronological order of the times in which the fictional events were set, may follow that exploration in terms of a series of key motifs.

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A. Introduction: The Development of Renée's

Oeuvre

1. The Early Years

Renée was born in 1929, the eldest of three children in her family. Her father was Pakeha and her mother was part Maori. She has outlined her Maori ancestry on her mother's side in an interview with Lisa Warrington in 1991:

My great great great grandfather, David Lewis, was a whaler, and he married Koko Porohiwi, a Maori woman from the Mahia. And then there is another Maori connection as well. So I say I am Ngati Kahungunu, but I'm also connected to Ngati Porou (77).

When she was four, her father committed suicide, for no apparent reason that anyone has ever been able to determine, leaving her mother with three young children to rear. Renée has described the details of this tragedy in her family in an interview with Peter Beatson in 1988:

My father left home one Saturday night, went to Hastings and bought a rifle, got onto a train, got out of the train at Palmerston North and was found between Palmerston North and Wellington with a glass and an unopened bottle of beer.¹ He had shot himself with a .22 rifle. In spite of valiant attempts by the police it was never established that there had been any marital discord of any major proportion, and he was earning five pounds a week which was a reasonable wage. In spite of my repeated questioning of his family now that they're older and I'm older, nobody has ever given me a satisfactory explanation (31).

¹ Renée now adds to this "This was what I knew at the time." Since then she has obtained a copy of her father's death certificate dated 13 December 1989 which records that he died at Thorndon Railway Yard North End on 30 April 1934 or 1 May 1934. A newspaper article in the *New Zealand Truth* revealed that her father was "Found lying at the foot of the railway embankment near the overhead bridge on the Hutt Road, Wellington, with a bullet hole in his forehead and a rifle resting between his knees." The article also records that there was a "lack of even the slightest semblance of motive" (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

These stark circumstances were to have a lasting effect on the sensitive and intelligent child that Renée was, and they would provide her with a view of the world which was greatly to influence her thematic concerns as a writer in later life.

Renée was reared in a working class family, and all her work has been written from the perspective of a working class writer. Her earliest memories are of the Great Depression of the 1930s, a time of great economic hardship for working class New Zealanders, and this was to provide the setting for her best-known work, *Wednesday to Come* (1984). Renée has acknowledged the influence of her childhood memories in the conception of the play:

I was born in 1929, so I had feelings and memories of the Depression that I drew on in *Wednesday to Come*. I have some very clear memories that I must have got when I couldn't have been much older than three, but they're not connected. Some experiences sear themselves into your memory and imagination. A lot of the experiences I had in those first ten years of my life were very serious and memorable ones, which is why I suppose they made such an impact on me (Beatson 32).

The child reared in the widow's household writes of solo mothering throughout the range of her output. She creates characters such as Ruth's mum, the centre of the household in all the stories gathered together under the title *Finding Ruth* (1987), Renée's only collection of short stories; Mary O'Malley, who has reared Barney in the play *Jeannie Once* (1990); Gertrude, named after Renée's grandmother (Harris, L. "Renée," 36), who has almost single-handedly reared both her daughter and her two granddaughters in *The Snowball Waltz* (1997); and Donna, mother of Sal, best

friend of the protagonist in her children's novel *I Have To Go Home* (1997).

Renée reveals that, "I didn't get much approval from my mother with whom I had a troubled relationship" (Beatson 26), but, nevertheless, it is her mother Rose to whom her best known work *Wednesday to Come* is dedicated, and it was she who was to make the most durable impression on her daughter's childhood.² In her published interviews Renée has frequently acknowledged her debt to the woman who reared her: "I see that we are all very deeply affected by this woman who mothers us" (McCurdy 69). It was her mother who was to influence her choice of the single Christian name under which she writes:

I like to call it my first name. It's the name my mother gave me and, when I left my husband, I was thinking about what name I would use, and I didn't want to go back to my father's name, and then I thought I had a perfectly good name that my mother gave me. But that very minor action has turned out to be a major political action in some ways because it's a question that everyone asks me, and I realise that it's unusual (Payne-Heckenberg and Mitchell 21).

Renée also acknowledges that it is her attempt to re-create Rose on the printed page that has led to some of her most powerful creations:

Wednesday to Come came about because I wanted to write something about my mother. Iris isn't really like mum, she's not as hard for a start, but it got somewhere close. I dealt with her more in a book of short stories called *Finding Ruth* (1987). There is a mother in *Groundwork* that's a little bit like mum (Warrington 77).

The real Rose was in many ways a sad woman. When she married a Pakeha she was cut off by her family. Living alone and isolated in the racially prejudiced society of the time, she was made to feel that she

² One of the things Renée made a point of doing on my first meeting with her was to show me a framed photograph of her mother (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997).

should reject her ancestry, and she refused to acknowledge her Maori blood to her children. Renée recalls,

She was ashamed of it. She was living in a society where it was a shameful thing to be Maori; she didn't talk about it at all. It's only as I've got older and have researched her background that I've come to know about it and be glad about it. But it means that I've missed out on that particular culture and a sense of being brought up in it; although I'm now very welcome in it and I feel very comfortable there. But my main cultural conditioning is European (Payne-Heckenberg and Mitchell 21).

As a result Renée grew up identifying herself with the Pakeha, yet at the same time, as a perceptive child, from her early days was picking up vibrations that there was something about her that was somehow unacceptable. She still recalls a telling remark from her early childhood that made a lasting impression: "On my first day at school I heard one of the teachers say, 'Pretty little thing. Pity she's so dark'. I didn't know what she meant. I do now" ("Outlook" *Dominion* 9 July 1985).³

This accounts, perhaps, for a series of characters in Renée's work who express a sense of being in a kind of no-woman's-land of cultural identity, caught between the Pakeha world, in which they have been reared, and a Maori tradition which they know very little about. As such

³ One of the most idiosyncratic features of Renée's oeuvre is the sparse dialogue she writes. In an interview in 1984 she related this back to her early years:

The language of the play [*Wednesday to Come*] is the language of childhood – it is very cryptic ... Those meanings are the sort of thing that children pick up. After all, that's part of growing up, translating words and silences between words into meaning (Van Grondelle).

In my first interview with Renée she emphasised very strongly that the reason for the "cryptic" language she writes in is that she is intensely aware of the vital importance of subtext. She says that if you can't read her subtext you can't understand her work (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997).

It is perhaps through remarks like the one quoted above, spoken unthinkingly in the presence of the perceptive child, that she indicates how she learned to read, and to recognise the significance of, subtext. Her own comments on the incident, for example, contain a wealth of implied meaning.

they may be indicators of the psychological place in which Renée has found herself to be:

Sometimes I feel alienated from the European world, and sometimes from the Maori world; because sometimes I feel inadequate in both of them (Hall, "Reinforcing Women's Rise").

The most fully drawn of these characters in this respect is Martha, the part Maori servant girl in *Jeannie Once*, who has been educated in a Protestant missionary school, but who, at the end of the play, sets off to re-discover the Maori side of her identity on the Mahia Peninsula, home of her mother's as well as of Renée's own mother's ancestors.

Howard McNaughton, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, has commented that in the field of New Zealand drama,

Jeannie Once...is of particular interest...for Martha, a part-Maori maid, a defiantly non-conformist, oppositional figure; even though raised in a mission, she refuses to be 'included' among the Christian community, and she is also engaged in a journey of self-discovery....In this, the character perhaps reflects the position of Renée herself, who at the time was engaged in various projects of life-writing, and whose wish to be identified as a Maori woman playwright was signalled by the listing of her work in the bibliography of Maori plays at the end of the *He Reo Hou* anthology (386).⁴

Other characters with echoes of Martha are to be found in Renée's work. In *Groundwork* (1985), a play set during the day of the last test of the Springbok Tour of 1981, an episode that highly inflamed racial tensions within New Zealand society, the character Emma, a thirty-year-old Maori woman, who has been imprisoned for making a protest against

⁴ Renée qualifies McNaughton's statement by commenting that the inclusion of her work in the bibliography "was more that I was invited to be on the list and I accepted, rather than signalling anything" (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

the Tour, herself becomes a “non-conformist oppositional figure” when she begins to question the implications that the Pakeha teaching tradition has had for her people. She asks her life-long friend Ellen, who is only part Maori and lighter of skin, why it is that in the school production of her childhood days, “you turned out to be the beautiful princess and I was the dirty old tinker, the evil one.” Ellen’s reply and the ensuing conversation suggests how children with cultural identity problems such as Martha have fared in the New Zealand society of the 1980s:

ELLEN: That was a kid’s play –

EMMA: And what were the kids taught Ellen? That it was good to be black? That it was something to be proud of?
ELLEN can’t answer – Not likely! Look, every Monday you go to school and teach in the system that guarantees our tamariki fail – you’re part of the group that says your kind of education is the only right one and that we either shape up or ship out – and most of us ship out – to prison, the works, cleaning, the gangs, the streets –

ELLEN: You didn’t –

EMMA: No. A few of us – slip through – (*Groundwork* 46).

Renée may have been reared in the Pakeha tradition, with little knowledge of the Maori dimension of her identity, but an important aspect of her writing, as one of the “few” who have been able to “slip through,” has been to express the point of view of Maori people who find themselves at a disadvantage in the dominant Pakeha culture. In this respect she herself takes on the role of the “non-conformist oppositional figure” in the sense that she challenges the assumption of that society that it has the right to annihilate a part of her cultural identity and to erode her sense of self-worth by the same process that had been visited on her mother. In the same play, in a flashback, Emma’s own mother recalls part of her experience of rejection as a Maori child, into which Renée has woven her

own life experience: "I wanted to stay in Nanny's house but they wouldn't let me and...in the end they shifted me to a Home...pretty little thing, pity she's so dark, hard to get people to take her" (*G* 17). In *Daisy and Lily* (1993), one of Daisy's main reasons for marrying Spenser is that he is one of the few people she has ever met who does not seem to care, or even to notice, that her skin is so dark (*Daisy and Lily* 96).⁵ It is significant, too, perhaps, that Renée's great-great-great-grandmother's family name Porohiwi keeps cropping up in her work. It is the name of the famous caves which provide the tourist attraction for the setting of *Te Pouaka Karaehe* (1992). It is Daisy's mother's surname in *Daisy and Lily*, and in her children's novel *I Have To Go Home* it is the name of the "Home" of the title to which the child longs to return. In *The Snowball Waltz*, Renée's first fictional work for adult readers that has a rural setting, Porohiwi becomes a fictitious small town. The landscape is one which she has acknowledged as being the home of her ancestors: "my roots are rural" (Hall, "Reinforcing Women's Rise").

The circumstance of having a suicide in the family proved to be an additional stigma. (Renée, personal interview 17 October 1997). The incidence of suicide forms a recurring motif in her work. The best-known instance is that of Ben in *Wednesday to Come*. The play begins shortly before Ben's coffin is carried on to the stage and ends when it is carried off again. Ben's suicide, unlike that of Renée's own father, has an identifiable

⁵ Aorewa McLeod drew attention to this aspect of Daisy's cultural identity crisis in her review of the novel: "It records the sense of loss in a woman brought up by Pakeha, who has no community" (50). Renée confirms her identification with the character in terms of colour-consciousness, "and like Daisy, I have always seen myself as too light for some and too dark for others" (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

cause that is made clear to the audience, and is related to his depression at the humiliation of being made into a human plough-horse. In this way, as Peter Beatson has perceptively commented to Renée, “you took what had been a private and personal tragedy in your own family and transformed it into a symbol for the wider social suffering of the Depression years” (31). The transformation of some aspect of private tragedy into symbol and motif has been a consistent feature of Renée’s artistic creation. The part Maori child of poverty, who is reared by the solo parent, is one of these, as has already been mentioned.

Her own mother, Rose, found herself at the bottom of the social heap, because of an unfortunate combination of circumstances in her life. This has led her daughter to come to the conclusion that,

Mum’s loaded with things that are almost too much to take. She’s part-Maori and she denied that. She was chucked out of her Catholic family because she married out of the Church. My father shot himself when I was about four and she had two other kids, one of whom was still a baby. And the response from people, apart from his family, particularly his two brothers, was that it must have been her fault. A husband doesn’t go out and shoot himself unless his wife has driven him to it. Her family except for one sister thought ‘serve her right’. If she hadn’t married out of the Church it never would have happened. So she just withdrew and became a recluse in lots of ways, except for a fortnightly trip to the pub when she had the money (Beatson 30).

Rose’s life was further circumscribed because, having found herself in a degraded social position over which she had little or no control, she then had to face the fact that, in hard times, as a working class female with little formal education and no qualifications, she was now on the lowest rung of the ladder as far as employment was concerned also. Like Ruth’s mother in *Finding Ruth*, she ended up scrimping on a pittance, “weeding

carrots for sixpence an hour” (“Renée – New Zealand Playwright” 30). A photograph of a benign Michael Joseph Savage on the wall replaced the image of Christ in offering the promise of a better world to come:

My mother had The Photo of Michael Joseph on the wall and all that. Some Catholic families have got the picture of Jesus with a bleeding heart all around the walls, and I imagine my mother’s family home was the same, because they were Irish Catholics. But she’d left all that behind to all intents and purposes. So she had Michael Joseph on the wall instead of Jesus. A lot of people did. There was a particular portrait of him that was very popular and everyone I knew had it on the wall. It was in all my friends’ houses. It didn’t seem all that untoward until I realised many years later that there were thousands of homes in New Zealand which didn’t have it on the wall! (Beatson 31).⁶

This recollection of household interiors from her childhood places Renée firmly within the tradition of working class writing in New Zealand literature. Janet Frame, in the same tradition, in the directly autobiographical work, *To the Is-land*, records the same portrait in her own family home.⁷ “Micky” Savage, from the point of view of many of the working class who believed in him, like Rose, actually did deliver on the promises he made, as Renée recalls, “The Labour Party had brought in the widow’s pension for which she gave him sole credit. It was cupboard love” (Beatson 32). Janet Frame records a more demonstrative expression of gratitude on the part of her father, recalling him dancing for joy around

⁶ Renée makes the comment that this interview was recorded on tape. The exclamation marks have therefore been added at a later date when the tape was transcribed. They are not hers, and she believes that they give a different emphasis to what has been said than the one she intended, and that as such they should be discounted. This applies in all instances to excerpts from the interview (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

⁷ Janet Frame remembers in her autobiography,

The election of the Labor government was almost like a Second Coming, so great was the joy in our household, and so revered the new prime minister, “Micky” Savage, whose poster-size photograph was now pinned to our kitchen wall, where it stayed...even when the Second World War was declared, Micky Savage was moved only slightly to make way for the map of the world with the tiny pinned flags (*To the Is-land* 130).

the room, the day he found out that due to the introduction of free health care he could write off the debt for his epileptic son's medical bills (*To the Is-land* 130-131).⁸

The practical effect of the disasters and the hardship the family endured in Renée's childhood was to place her in a position where she had virtually no space in which to be a child, but was forced instead to become a miniature adult. As Rose became more withdrawn, so Renée, as the eldest, became parent to the other children:

I met people who knew her when she was young and she was the brightest, bubbliest of women. When I remember her she had changed into a recluse who only went out once or twice a month – I did the shopping. I took my brother and sister to school on their first day and I changed her library books (“Renée – New Zealand Playwright” 30).

The dominant personality traits that the child developed, in response to the circumstances in which she found herself, are now so indelibly entrenched, that as an adult she is unable to shake them off. Accountability is one for example: “I’ve always been a responsible kind of person. I’ve tried at times to be irresponsible but I just can’t. I’m just not programmed to do it” (Beatson 27). Another was a gruelling work ethic:

Most of my life is work, and most of the people that I mix with – most of my friends, just about everybody I know works really hard. In fact, I’m attracted towards people that work – I consider that to be a really admirable quality in a person (Warrington 82).

⁸ *The Oxford History of New Zealand* records that,

Although the Labour Government elected in 1935 did not alter the distribution of economic power, its welfare measures removed many inequalities. The new Government believed that all New Zealanders were entitled to a job or an unemployment benefit, an income adequate for a family with three children, free hospitalization, free maternity care, heavily subsidised medical attention, and a free education to university level. The old, the poor, the unemployed and children benefited (Oliver 277).

There was also the constant fight against dirt and poverty, which was part of the reason for the fostering of the work ethic, all of which was summed up in the development of a strictly “no nonsense” attitude to life.⁹ When asked by Lisa Warrington why, even today, she did not feel as if she could “indulge in emotions,” Renée replied by explaining it in terms of her childhood experience:

Because you’ll get hurt. Because it makes you vulnerable. When you think about it, I think it’s probably natural that the era I grew up in, the poverty, the family tragedy, all those sorts of things tend to teach you that no-one really wants to know. I mean, they don’t want you sitting and feeling sorry for yourself. The idea is to get out and work and do something about it. About improving either the family situation or yours. And not moan about it (82).¹⁰

Significantly, therefore, hand in hand with an over-developed sense of responsibility allied to an over demanding work ethic came the burning desire for improvement in social status.

⁹ The majority of Renée’s characters are working class and a good proportion of them are representatives of the poorer sections of that class. Alec, in *Jeannie Once* (1990), for example, and Ben, in *Wednesday to Come* (1984), are unemployed. Even in the children’s play *Pink Spots and Mountain Tops* (1992) one of the central characters, Annabel, has a father who has been made redundant. The first play of *Secrets* (1982) is centred entirely on Elsie, a cleaner. Some women are impoverished housewives, such as those in *Wednesday to Come*, others like Ruth’s mum in *Finding Ruth* (1987) and Trudy in *Groundwork* (1985), are beneficiaries. If they do have a skill, they are poorly paid, like Jeannie in *Jeannie Once*. In *Missionary Position* (1991) all of the characters are vagrants who have no home at all. There are exceptions to this, however, and *Setting the Table* (1981), *Groundwork*, *Willy Nilly* (1990), *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood* (1992), *The Snowball Waltz* (1997) and *I Have To Go Home* (1997) all have characters who are teachers, for example.

¹⁰ This combination of circumstances meant that Renée, as a child, often found herself in the position of being discriminated against. This, perhaps, explains her predilection for creating central characters who, for one reason or another, are regarded as “outsiders,” for which reason they, too, are likely to be discriminated against. *Setting the Table*, *Secrets*, *What Did You Do In The War Mummy?* (1982), *Asking For It* (1983), *Wednesday to Come*, *Breaking Out* (1984), *Dancing* (1984), *Groundwork*, *Pass It On* (1986), *Belle’s Place* (1987), *Born to Clean* (1987), *Mercy Buckets* (1987), *Finding Ruth*, *Jeannie Once*, *Willy Nilly*, *Touch of the Sun* (1991), *Missionary Position*, *Te Pouaka Karaehe* (1992), *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood*, *Pink Spots and Mountain Tops*, *Heroines*, *Hussies and High High Flyers* (1993), *Daisy and Lily* (1993), *Does This Make Sense To You?* (1995), *The Snowball Waltz* and *Yin and Tonic* (1998) all include such characters. This pattern is present, therefore, in the vast majority of her works.

The antidotes to all the unpalatable realities of Renée's childhood came in two major forms. The first was a means of escape in books, which she discovered at a tender age. Ironically, even this trait in her personality, which prevails with her to the present day,¹¹ was once again the direct result of the pressures in Rose's life:

I read my first book when I was eight years old and I could actually read before I went to school. The reasons why Mum taught me to read were quite practical. I talked a lot and asked a lot of questions. She was a widow with two other kids and she wanted some peace and quiet! She wanted to shut me up, so she taught me to recognise words with the result that by the time I went to school I had started to read.

Even so, that which was born of practical necessity for Rose, proved to be a source of infinite delight for her daughter:

But I can see yet the first proper book I ever read. It was one of those red-bound L.M.Montgomery books called *Emily of New Moon*. I picked it up and I don't remember putting it down until I had finished it. I must have done, I must have had to go to bed in between, but my memory is just of reading that book sitting at the coal range with my feet in the oven on a piece of wood, reading and reading and reading. I realised then what wonderful things books were. They took me away from any misery (Beatson 25).

The second source of escape was in the approval and encouragement she found at school. She loved learning and was encouraged in this by the teachers and accepted by her peers. She became a high achiever and revelled in it:

Actually I just loved school and the feeling of being good at it...what I got at school from the teachers was great, and somehow or other I did seem to fit in with the kids too. I can't understand why really, because I wasn't good at sports. I was a fairly timid child. I used to be library monitor and things like that. But I certainly think the teachers liked me (Beatson 26).

¹¹ The present of a book is still Renée's "favourite, favourite gift" (Doolan, personal correspondence 14 August 1997).

It was at school that she experienced her first thrill of participating in the theatre:

When I was at school – I only had those few years of formal schooling – one of the things that happened every year was a concert, and half of the concert was singing and choral work, and half was a play, and once I got to standard four I was always in it, and I was usually the lead. And I really enjoyed it – I loved being someone else, and working on it and dressing up. So whatever draws me to the theatre – whether it's love or anger or passion or irritation or whatever it is – it's going to be a life-long affair. A little more than an affair – shall we say a relationship (Warrington 75).

Renée's works quite often refer to the influence of theatres in her characters' lives. In the second story in *Finding Ruth*, "Captain Jinks," the young protagonist, a schoolgirl, has already learnt, as Renée herself did as a child, that playacting can be an antidote to the harshness of a life dominated by poverty. In "The Last Stand" (1960), one of Renée's earliest published short stories, the social occasion the wife is determined to attend, and over which she makes the "last stand" of the title, in an attempt to break out of the confinement of domesticity, is the Group Theatre's Annual Social Evening.

In both of these works theatricality is seen as a means of escape, as is the Music Hall in *Jeannie Once*. But in this play the theatre is also the means by which several of the characters make a living. In *Daisy and Lily*, Lily has been a professional actress and Daisy's husband Spenser becomes a famous director. Olivia, who eventually becomes Spenser's second wife, is also an actress.

The theatre is also seen as a means of political expression. In *Setting the Table* (1981) and *Breaking Out* (1984), the characters are shown in the

process of rehearsing feminist revues. So Renée portrays the theatre in her work, as it has functioned in her own life, as a means of escape, as a means of making a living and as a mouthpiece for her political messages.

All of these elements that made up her childhood – the poverty, the responsibility, the work ethic, along with the tried and true means of escape – Renée re-enacts through her fictional children, who appear mainly in her prose. We see the child in *Finding Ruth* learning to tread the fine line between being acknowledged as a high achiever by her teacher and being accepted by her peers, in the first story of the collection, “Teacher’s Pet.” In the second story, “Captain Jinks,” the child, already involved in the school production, learns from a veteran of the First World War how useful the diversion of a song and dance can be, when the realities of life become too harsh to bear.¹² In the third story, “Oranges and Peaches,” we see her, the child of poverty, who has never tasted an orange, unable to afford even the basic necessities of schooling, such as a new folder in which to keep her work. Her mother struggles to provide the basic necessities for her family’s survival, being partly dependent on handouts such as the peaches that her brothers-in-law bring, from which she can make the jam to feed her child through the winter.¹³ “Solo” explores the delights of music for the talented child, on the one hand, but on the other the story is strongly undercut with her growing awareness of

¹² Renée adds another dimension to this interpretation: “To me this story also says that art is the most important and often the most comforting element we have” (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

¹³ Renée remembers a time when her family ran out of food. All they had to eat was the leeks and pumpkins in the garden. For years after that she couldn’t face eating pumpkin soup (Renée, personal interview 17 October 1997).

the difference between middle class and working class values, and with her then finding the solution in a subtle form of rebellion. Throughout the collection of stories there is an acute sense of the mother at the centre of the household, employing various devices to combat the degradation of poverty, and in doing so, being not quite like other mothers, so that the child, in response, begins to develop strategies to cope with her own sense of difference, such as being the only one she knows who has to constantly shift from one cheap rental property to another even cheaper one. Renée remembers living in eighteen different houses when she was young, and the method Rose devised so that her children would not feel unsettled is the same one used by Ruth's mum: "We would leave the old place in the morning to go to school, go to find the new place after school and find it set up" ("Renée – New Zealand Playwright" 30). In *Daisy and Lily*, we see Daisy in her childhood, washing on Saturdays "every stitch of clothing I'd worn in the week, which meant every stitch of clothing I owned. While I washed them I wore an old shirred elastic swimming togs under a man's shirt." Also Daisy cleans the house from top to bottom, while her mother prepares for a night out at the pub. At the same time, throughout all this process, the antidote is injected, with the novel repeating the same phrase Renée used to describe the influence of books in her own childhood: "I read and read and read" (*D&L* 35). Later in life, miserable in her marriage, Daisy reads all the time to escape from her unhappiness. In the children's story *I Have To Go Home*, the protagonist Sweet Pea excels at drama, reciting Shakespeare in the school production, and gets "[her] best marks

for English” (*I Have To Go Home* 26). When she is at home, according to her mother, “If she’s not cleaning and tidying she’s reading” (*IHTGH* 23).

So Renée, like Dickens, one of her favourite authors, and Janet Frame, one of her contemporaries, consistently re-creates personas reflecting her own self as a child, in her works, but at the same time she re-crafts her childhood in the process of catharsis. Ruth’s mum, for example, makes delicious meals, whereas Rose was an indifferent cook (Renée, personal interview 17 October 1997). Daisy, despite the difficulties of her childhood, has no brothers and sisters to look after. Sweet Pea’s mum is a teacher earning a good wage, as well as being supportive of her daughter.

Poverty in the end robbed Renée’s childhood even of antidote. Although she was a high achiever she still had to leave school at twelve¹⁴ in order to bring extra money into the house, which helped also in part to support first her brother and then her sister through High School. She got a job at first illegally, by lying about her age and saying she was fifteen, at a woollen mill in Napier.¹⁵ “I got twenty-two shillings a week and I gave Mum ten. That just made the difference, and my brother was able to go to high school” (Beatson 26). Even though she was “very angry, terribly upset” when she had to leave school, she realised, even then, I just don’t

¹⁴ In her interview with Peter Beatson, quoted often in this section, it is recorded that she left school at thirteen (26). Actually she left at twelve. When I asked her about this, the deep impression this event made in her childhood was reflected again nearly sixty years later. She could immediately lay her hands on her school leaving certificate. It stated that she started school on 27 May 1935 and left on 17 December 1941 (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999).

¹⁵ Janet Frame’s fictional re-creation of her own childhood parallels Renée’s in this respect. In *Owls Do Cry* Francie, sister of the protagonist Daphne, leaves school at twelve to go and work in a woollen mill (*Owls Do Cry* 28, 31).

see how she could have managed without that extra actual cash in her hand each week. My brother worked weeding carrots for sixpence an hour and paid for his high school clothes. My extra ten shillings only helped with books and the bus fare. Jimmy himself paid for his clothes out of that miserable weeding money...And my sister went to high school the following year too (Beatson 27).

A few weeks later she got a better job at Venables and Willis,¹⁶ a printing factory, by a daring demonstration of resource and initiative for one so young:

I got a letter from the printing place saying that the person they had taken on hadn't proved satisfactory so that if I wanted the job it was mine. I thought: 'Yes I do want that. It's a step up from the woollen mills'. I was scared that they'd give it to someone else on Monday, so on Saturday I caught the bus to Napier and looked in the telephone book – we didn't have a telephone at home – and found out where the manager of the woollen mills lived. I walked there from the town, found him in the garden and told him that I wanted to leave but I didn't want to lose my money. He said that was all right, and he sent me the money after I left the mills. Looking back, I think it was very brave of me to have done that, but it was desperation. I wanted to go up in the world a bit (Beatson 26).

Thus she began to pursue a life-long path to self-improvement.

Renée concludes this part of her life:

She moved to another printing factory, Swailes Ltd, to learn to work on machines. Venables and Willis had applied to the Manpower Committee in an attempt to stop her leaving but their appeal was unsuccessful. It was at Swailes she met her future husband who came to work there on his release from the Air Force after the war.¹⁷

¹⁶ Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999.

¹⁷ Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999.

2. Marriage and Explorations

Renée's most enduring impression of the 1950s was "all I can remember of those years was feeling very tired" (Beatson 32). By 1955 she had a husband and three children to look after. Her husband was a hard worker, but was not highly paid, and so she worked at part-time jobs throughout their married life, as well as looking after the home. After she was first married, she and her husband worked on various farms around Hawkes Bay. He was a general farm hand and she was the cook. Some farms had no electricity. There was little else to eat but mutton, silver beet, potatoes and perhaps a few carrots. When they went into town she and her husband would sometimes buy sausages from their own money to vary the diet of the men she cooked for.

In spite of the hard work and the primitive conditions, there was still a compulsion to write, which was a legacy of her school days. She still remembers banging away at an old typewriter and being interrupted by the wife of the boss who was astonished to be informed that a mere cook could be attempting to do such a thing as write a novel (Beatson 33).

When her eldest son was seven, she had an operation for a ruptured ovarian cyst, and, because after that she needed rest, which, incidentally, she says she never got, and because she and her husband were concerned about the children not having adequate schooling in isolated areas, the family moved into Napier. Despite the work-load of rearing a family and doing part-time work, she began to search for various means of self-expression. All this did not gain momentum "until I was thirty" when,

despite the continued sense of “a dreadful, dreadful tiredness,” she began writing again (McCurdy 61). She had seen an advertisement for the Hawkes Bay branch of the New Zealand Women Writers’ Association, and she got in touch with Eve Ebbett, the contact person for the Hawkes Bay branch, and arrived on her doorstep with “about 10 rather grotty little stories” (McCurdy 62). Eve, however, was delighted, and said she should have no trouble becoming a member. She stayed in the Association for years.

Then gradually she began to be published. First she got an article in the *New Zealand Free Lance*. Then *The Mirror* accepted a story. After a while she started doing reviews and some articles for the *Hawkes Bay Herald Tribune* and a few radio book reviews. (McCurdy 62).

As a child she had been in despair when she found she must leave school:

When I discovered that Mum was in earnest and that was how it was, I just didn’t try. The last three months of Form 2 were really quite sad, but I just stopped trying. The teachers who had been fond of me were very angry by then. They expected me to be Dux and I wasn’t.

Now she decided to make up the education she had been so angry to lose. She began studying for an extramural degree through Massey University: “I was giving myself something I had wanted when I was younger and which nobody else was going to give me” (Beatson 27).

Also Renée had learned to love the theatre back in her school days, and now the family was in Napier she used to take her own children to see matinees of live theatre shows in Hastings. Then she saw an advertisement in the local paper inviting people to audition for a play, to be directed by

May Macdonald, who was well known in the area. At the audition May lined up all the women who were auditioning and asked them to scream and Renee got the part. She did four more plays for May, worked with some other directors, and then decided she would like to try directing herself. She heard the local branch of the Catholic Women's League wanted a director, and within this group she was "free to do what I wanted because there was no one there who was more experienced than me, who could say: 'That's not the right way.' I had to find out for myself." Also, the hall being used was only a few doors from where she was living, so it was very convenient (McCurdy 63).

She worked as a director with a few other amateur groups as well. Then the family shifted to Wairoa where she and her husband owned and operated a dairy. The over-developed work ethic and the desire for self-improvement, instigated in early childhood, persisted. There she began writing a weekly column for the local paper. As well as this she was still taking extramural papers and helping in the shop. While she remained in Wairoa she directed a major play each year for about fifteen years, as well as working as a director with school children. During this time she experimented with a wide variety of genres: pageants for the church, Gilbert and Sullivan, thrillers and feminist plays (Payne-Heckenberg and Mitchell 22-23).

She decided she wanted to do a play called *Butterflies are Free*, by Leonard Gershe, and started looking for a female lead. A social worker called Bernadette had recently come to town, and although she had only done musicals before, Renée phoned her up and asked her if she would be

interested. Eventually she was to give Bernadette the part, and then they did “two or three plays together” before Bernadette was transferred to Auckland (McCurdy 64).

Bernadette felt strongly attracted to feminist ideals. Renée was still in the habit of “leaving everything prepared, with meals in the freezer and all that,” if she was going to be away, but it was she who decided to attend the United Women’s Convention in Wellington in 1975, and Bernadette went with her. For Renée it was a watershed in her life:

it was just like being converted to a religion. I felt that I was coming home. I discovered a lot of reasons why I had been angry. And apart from that it was just such fun, it was so great! I picked up some copies of *Broadsheet* and I have been a subscriber ever since. At the end we sang “I Am Woman” together – two thousand of us! And the last thing they said was: ‘Go back to your homes and do something about it’. I can’t remember the exact words, but that was the message (Beatson 36).

It was Margaret Mead who had delivered the imperative in person (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999), and on the way back Renée and Bernadette discussed what they would do to “do something about it.” They decided they would set up a Women’s Centre in Wairoa. Nothing fancy, just a modest affair where women from the country could stop off with the kids when they needed a place to wait in between getting the car fixed or going to the dentist. Renée claims that this was the most political act of her life so far, and that it set her “on the road to feminism.” They called a meeting to ask for support, and to their amazement and delight, despite it being a very cold night in August, seventy women turned up and gave them a mandate to continue with the idea. Neither of them, though, was prepared for the patronising and dismissive attitude of many of the

local government officials towards an idea that seemed to the women to be grounded in common sense. Even worse, Renée still recalls the backlash of abuse that the setting up of the Women's Centre caused. The walls of the dairy that she and her husband owned and operated were plastered with abusive graffiti. However, the Women's Centre was eventually set up and Sonja Davies was invited to open it (Beatson 36).

Renée still recalls how delighted they all were when Sonja Davies made a special gesture by coming, despite having a very busy schedule (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997). Sonja Davies herself remembers that when Renée wrote to her, asking her to come, she put off three other engagements because, in the climate of the time, she thought what a wonderful thing it was that a group of women from a rural area, which she knew would be dominated by male councillors, should have had the courage to do a thing like that (Davies, personal interview 9 December 1997). Renée puts a different interpretation on it with the gift of hindsight: "It was just naivety really" (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999). Sonja Davies recounted, too, her impression of Renée at that time. She was "vibrant, enthusiastic, certain of what she was doing. I could see she was not your ordinary Wairoa housewife. There was something bubbling inside her" (Davies, telephone interview 4 February 1999).

So Renée was to leave Wairoa having almost completed her degree, as a popular newspaper columnist, and a well established amateur theatre

director, as well as someone who had helped raise feminist political awareness in the local area.

3. The Emergence of a Full Time Writer

From Wairoa Renée and her husband moved to Auckland, so that she could complete her degree, as level three papers could not be done extramurally in 1979. As well as being a full-time student she took on various part-time jobs, including working at Theatre Corporate as a cleaner,¹⁸ then working on the till at the University Bookshop. After she graduated she worked at Long Bay College teaching English and Drama (McCurdy 64).

In the midst of all this activity came a mid-life crisis. She was approaching fifty and experiencing severe menopausal symptoms.¹⁹ She began to take stock of her life:

I found that I wanted to be alone a lot of the time. I started to face the way my life was going. I turned 50 and thought about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Did I want to lie on my death-

¹⁸ Renée notes that in 1986 she “went back there as playwright in residence” (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

¹⁹ The menopause was another subject that significantly affected many women’s lives but which was often considered to be inappropriate for public discussion. In an article published in *Broadsheet* in November 1983, Renée challenged this taboo by openly outlining how the symptoms affected her lifestyle. In the article she also quoted the words of a male doctor who claimed that “as the oestrogen is shut off, a woman comes as close as she can to being a man...Not really a man, but no longer a functional woman, these individuals live in a world of intersex...sex no longer interests them,” which she claimed was “an example of the arrogance, indifference and woman hatred which abounds amongst those who ‘specialise’ in women’s ‘problems’” (“Change of Life” 9). In *Dancing*, she portrayed a woman with severe menopausal symptoms like her own in the character of Alice.

bed and think of all the things I'd wanted to do that I hadn't done? ("Change of Life" 10).

Although the menopausal symptoms were a scourge that made her life a misery in many ways, it was as a direct result of them that she found the space to re-assess where she stood:

Wanting to be alone seemed to be a terrible thing to say. I was living in a long-term heterosexual relationship and my partner who had been getting more and more threatened by my involvement with feminists and lesbian feminists now saw my decision to sleep in a different room as personal rejection...After a while something strange happened. I started to revel in the limited freedom of having a room to myself...I opted for celibacy and this was great...

She began to do the things she wanted rather than to just consider what other people might think: "I began to question the compromises I had made and took steps to stop my habit of seeking male approval or permission for my actions...I started writing what I wanted to write" ("Change of Life" 10).

The process led to her having to come to terms with her emotions, and she came to the conclusion that Bernadette, with whom she had for years "talked non-stop...thrashed out a lot of political stuff ... rowed ... debated ...worked...was probably the most important person in the world for me" (McCurdy 64). She was a grandmother by this time and had been married for over thirty years.²⁰ The conclusion she came to about her

²⁰ Becoming a professional writer at this stage in her life has meant that Renée has frequently encountered prejudice against her age. She writes about this with wry humour in her latest work *Yin and Tonic* in such pieces as "To tell or not to tell, that is the answer." It is perhaps a reaction to this attitude that has prompted her to create a series of

priorities was not the reason why she decided to leave the marriage:²¹ “I left...because I had got terribly damaged” (McCurdy 64). By the time she did leave, she had found that the “no nonsense” attitude to life which she had cultivated since childhood no longer worked, that it was no longer possible not to take her own feelings into account.

By then she could not drive or use the telephone. For a year Bernadette did these things for her:

I think that was the first time I recognised that there was such a thing as mental illness, that emotions could make you ill, and that was something that should be respected, just as much as if your foot were cut off. So that was a real learning experience for me, because I was one of the sniffiest people about people pulling themselves together and getting on with it because I had always done it (McCurdy 65).

intelligent and influential old women in her work. The best known of these is perhaps Granna, in *Wednesday to Come*.

²¹ The subject of the wife going through the process of deciding to leave the marriage is discussed at various places in her work. *Breaking Out* (1984) ends with the wife telling the husband that she will “probably” leave (36). On the copy of the script held at Playmarket Renée has left a hand-written instruction “white out Taylor.” So this play must have been written at the time when she first decided to write under her Christian name alone, and to delete her married surname. In the next year she wrote *Dancing*, which ends with both the central characters having decided to leave their marriages. *Does This Make Sense To You?* opens with the protagonist Flora making up her mind to leave her marriage of twenty five years standing. At the end of the novel, when her husband suggests reconciliation, Flora replies, “I want to be by myself for a while.” In her new-found independent space she has made up her mind to become more involved in the theatre and to find out about her Maori ancestry (*Does This Make Sense To You?* 158). Both intentions parallel those of the author after her own marriage break up.

The radio play *Rugosa Roses Are Very Hardy*, written under the overall title *Diversions For An Idle Hour* (1994) is about a marriage break up. Another radio play *Hard and Unfamiliar Words* (1996) also deals with the same subject with the wife making up her mind to leave the marriage and in the process learning to become more financially and emotionally independent.

Renée and Bernadette have been partners and have lived together ever since that time.²² Looking back, in 1983, on her decision she came to the conclusion that,

I realised that marriage was a health hazard and that I would never be really well while I stayed in it. I recognised my love for women and for one particular woman and looked back to the times my sanity had been saved by the love and friendship of other women. Some time after I left my marriage I realised I was a lesbian ("Change of Life" 11).

The change of lifestyle accompanied a strong surge of creative activity which has continued unabated for almost twenty years. In 1981 she wrote three plays. The first of these, *Setting the Table*, was begun on New Year's Day, while she was still living with her husband and teaching at Long Bay College, and she finished it in four weeks "because it was in my head" (Payne-Heckenberg and Mitchell 23).

The difference between the text of *Setting the Table* and the content of the scrapbook of short stories, reviews and articles by herself that Renée had collected and kept from her days as a part-time newspaper columnist in Hawkes Bay is remarkable.²³ The comparison makes patently clear the influence that the "religion" of feminism has had on the writer's creative life. The articles in the scrapbook were all written from the position of a housewife and mother, and are generally banal, though they

²² Since she began writing professionally Renée has often been outspoken about her sexual preference. *Jeannie Once, Willy Nilly, Daisy and Lily, Does This Make Sense To You?, The Snowball Waltz* and *Yin and Tonic* are all dedicated to Bernadette "with love."

²³ Renée lent me the scrapbook on a visit I made to see her on 19 August 1998. Comments made that relate to the scrapbook all concern articles kept in this collection.

do display an irony and a fresh sense of humour which were to filter through into her work as a professional writer.

The first in the collection, "My Son", is dated March 7 1958 and the last, September 25 1969, so the collection spans eleven years. During this time she sometimes wrote under the pseudonym "Mary Lewis."²⁴ Her son, who in the first article was still at the stage where he was refusing to wear white socks to go to church, has by 1969 taken up surfing and is saving up to go to university. All the collected articles are concerned with domestic or local issues. Helping children with homework, watching the son play rugby, persuading father to let the boys keep a stray cat, losing and then catching again the family budgie, a profile of the school bus driver, and advice on how to get away with serving bread and butter and calling it a formal dinner, are all typical of the content. A paragraph from a piece entitled "Take Half a Pheasant" probably sums up the persona who still most often wrote under her husband's surname, rather than under a pseudonym:

I have come to the conclusion after much intense thought, that my husband doesn't want me to be fetching, elegant, or glamorous when he comes home from work. All he's interested in after a hard day's work is whether we've got steak for tea, and, if so have I fried plenty of onions to go with it. I have to admit it's a great relief. We are both in a rut, according to the oracles, but strangely enough it suits us.

The final article in the scrapbook is about a hat parade.

²⁴ The pseudonym was derived from her great-great-great-grandmother, who had married David Lewis, the whaler (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999). It is interesting to note then, that by the late 1960s, Renée was becoming more aware of the Maori element of her cultural identity.

All this is poles apart from *Setting the Table*, which revolves around a group of lesbians living in the same household and fighting in various ways for women's causes. One of their number, when the play opens, has just taken personal revenge on a rapist, by attacking him with a knife, tying him to a fence, hanging a placard round his neck saying "rapist" and wrapping a yellow ribbon round his penis. This is hardly the kind of topic that would be palatable to the Hawkes Bay newspaper readers. But the excursion to the Women's Convention in 1975, the struggle to open the Women's Centre in Wairoa, absorbing the influence of the articles *Broadsheet* was publishing, taking level three university papers, one on women's literature, and contributing to debate and discussion with the Auckland feminists, all within the space of six years: all these had their effect.²⁵ According to Renée, *Setting the Table* was the first piece of work she had written that she could be proud of:

Up until then, apart from one or two short stories that I'm not ashamed of, and one or two book reviews that I think were quite insightful, what I wrote was very careful. In lots of ways I'm quite ashamed of it (Beatson 28).

A few items in the scrapbook, however, give a glimpse of the calibre of the mind that lay behind the domesticated persona. There is a review of *The Gemini*, a novel by Meg Elizabeth Atkins which deals with the subject of homosexuality; Renée in the concluding paragraph of the review commends the author for her "comprehending compassion which won my

²⁵ Renée also adds to this list "reading a wealth of feminist writings which were pouring out of the women's presses" (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

admiration and respect” (“The Inseparables”²⁶). There is a short story written for the *Marist Messenger* called “The Clever Boy,” which deals with the devastating pain that a patronising attitude among adults can cause to an intelligent child who is physically handicapped; and there is the gentle “Love Story” written for *Northland* in 1960 about an awkward initiation into marriage for a young farmer and his new bride. Most telling of all, published in *Arena* in Autumn 1960, is “The Last Stand”, a chilling tale of a highly respectable churchgoing man who bullies and confines his wife. When she makes a modest attempt to stand up to him, the uncontrollable rage that results from this reveals to her “the ugly creature that lay behind his pious conservative front” (“The Last Stand” 16). This short story, written only a year after the first item in the scrapbook, reveals, long before the excursion to the United Women’s Convention in 1975, the budding feminist and advocate of women’s rights. *Setting the Table* was conceived in the climate of feminist protest:

there’s a massage parlour in K Road [Auckland] which used to – and still does – annoy a lot of us. There have been various actions when people have painted it out and that sort of thing. The women in the play took that kind of action (Beatson 29).

In her latest book, a volume of comic writings *Yin and Tonic* (1998), Renée, almost twenty years on, recounts a story of herself attempting to glue a brick to the window of a shop that displayed what she considered to be offensive posters of women, in a peaceful political protest of this kind

²⁶ Renée has cut off the date of this article in the scrapbook and it has not been practical to trace it. The book, however, was published in 1964.

(*Yin and Tonic* 128-30).

In Auckland she had become one of the *Broadsheet* collective. The journal *Broadsheet* had been “the nation’s first,” and by the 1980s was “one of the world’s oldest, feminist magazines” (Coney 12), and it was planning its tenth anniversary. It had become notorious for tackling sensitive issues related to women that the rest of the New Zealand press usually chose to skirt around or ignore: attitudes to rape and incest, domestic violence, racism, homosexuality, and the problems of female beneficiaries. In an article published at the time, “*Broadsheet* Ten Years On”, which carries on the front page a photograph of the *Broadsheet* collective, with Renée on the extreme left, Sandra Coney reported that in the University Bookshop on the Auckland campus, “*Broadsheet* is one of the top selling magazines, bought by a wide variety of women” (Coney 13). It may have been provocative and controversial, but the magazine had gained in popularity because it had become a major mouthpiece for the feminist movement, which had been gathering momentum in New Zealand, as in the rest of the world, since the early 1970s.

The feminist movement in New Zealand in the early 1980s, in which Renée was now a participant, was, at that time, a hotbed of discussion and political activism on many issues, that would become the subjects of the articles in *Broadsheet*. The members of the Collective were some of the most intelligent and creative of the Auckland feminist set, but they were also highly individualistic. As each issue of the magazine was

being produced and put to press, debate often raged among them (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999).

It was amid this climate that Renée began her career as a full-time writer. She gave up her position as a teacher of English and Drama in 1981, went to work on *Broadsheet* part time, and “threw myself into the world as a person who lived by writing”²⁷ (Warrington 75).

By then she had already written a twenty-minute piece which had been performed at the opening of one of the *Broadsheet* seminars, and which proved to be very successful (Rosier, “Born to Clean” 42). Now they asked her to extend the piece into a revue to commemorate their tenth anniversary. She came up with *What Did You Do In The War Mummy?* (1982), a series of feminist skits dealing with the female condition in New Zealand society from 1838 until the early 1980s, interspersed with songs sung to well-known tunes with lyrics adapted to suit the script.²⁸ The script itself, in keeping with the philosophy of *Broadsheet*, mirrors the

²⁷ The issue of what she may have written for *Broadsheet*, apart from the items noted in the bibliography is outside the scope of this study.

²⁸ From her earliest days as a full-time writer Renée wanted to provide an alternative to the traditional subject matter of plays that were being produced on the New Zealand stage, which had very little New Zealand content, were often English in origin, and presented almost exclusively the male view of the world: “We’d had enough of Mayfair, and the rugby changing sheds and Gallipoli” (Warrington 85).

Mervyn Thompson, a prominent New Zealand playwright and actor, also pointed out very strongly the lack of New Zealand content in the theatre tradition in which he learned his craft. He comments that in his amateur theatre days in Reefton the Drama Club was doing “some marvellous theatre work in that little town” but that they were “divorcing themselves from the lives of the people,” because all the plays were by overseas playwrights, such as “George Bernard Shaw, Moliere and J.B.Priestley.” The same pattern followed when he went to university in Christchurch in the early 1960s and worked with one of the most prominent directors in New Zealand at the time: “I did theatre work with Ngaio Marsh – and her vision of reality was again that we had to acquire those lovely English voices. We had to kill any New Zealand connotations. That was what ‘culture’ meant” (“Theatre and Working Class” 19).

stances of many of the articles published in the magazine, which challenged the patriarchal attitude of the Church, the Government and the system of Law and Order towards feminist issues.²⁹ It also, as did the magazine, places women, particularly working class women, at the centre of attention.³⁰

When making the bookings for *What Did You Do In The War Mummy?*, *Broadsheet* gave each venue the option to have the show played to all-female or to mixed audiences. Most chose both. This meant that the cast had twice as much work because they had to perform two shows a night instead of one; but they found that the all-female audience seemed to be more relaxed about and responsive to the content of the show, which, for its time, was highly controversial, dealing as it does outspokenly with subjects which had traditionally been theatrical taboos, such as incest, rape, domestic violence and lesbianism. One song, for example, celebrates “superdyke power”. The word “superdyke” had never been spoken on the New Zealand stage before, and every time the character appeared she was greeted with roars of laughter and approval from the audiences (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999).

²⁹ Renée, like many of the writers of the articles in *Broadsheet*, has always been very critical of the attitude of the male towards the female in New Zealand society and the tradition of secrecy which pervades the less savoury aspects of it. “Man’s inhumanity to woman is so all-pervasive that it’s not really worth commenting on. So hardly anybody does” (“Theatre and Politics” 17).

³⁰ As a feminist Renée is interested in, and accepting of, all aspects of the female condition. *Heroines, Hussies and High High Flyers*, commissioned by Zonta, Dunedin, as its Suffrage Year project in 1993, includes nuns, prostitutes, murderers and cross dressers as representations of parts of the female experience that is portrayed on the stage. This pageant also played to matinees of schoolchildren, indicating that schools are interested in bringing their pupils into contact with the wide spectrum of female lifestyles.

There was a furore of responses. A complaint was made to the Human Rights Commission about the women-only audiences. In Gisborne people hung in the windows to watch the show. Most reviews were favourable, but even if they weren't the cast still played to packed houses all over the country (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999).³¹

Renée's first full-length, publicly performed script thus reflected the themes, the theatrical techniques and the theatrical philosophy which were to become characteristic of her oeuvre. The revue ends with a plea for women to think about the issues of the "War" of the title, which refers to the battle to try to win the struggle for the feminist objectives that are highlighted in the performance. Thus, from the beginning, Renée as a dramatist drew attention to the confrontation between male and female, and between the characters she places centre stage and the Establishment:

To all these women
 To all you women
 To you who are here
 To you who aren't
 Thinking is dangerous
 But it makes for security
 Thinking can hurt you
 But it heals the raw places

³¹ Renée also recalls that *Born to Clean*, a musical play that she conceived and toured the country with in 1987, was received with an equally enthusiastic response. In Auckland, for example, the cast had difficulty getting in to perform because the three flights of stairs up to the theatre were packed with people wanting to get into the show (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999). The play also played to packed houses in Sydney (Warrington 77).

Thinking can divide us

But it can bring us together" (*What Did You Do In The War Mummy?* 14).

It can be argued that at bottom the key imperative in all of Renée's oeuvre is to urge women, as this excerpt does, to think about the issues she writes about, allied to her unshakeable belief in the positive effects of the female bond which is suggested in the last line. Accordingly, her first full-length work to be performed is indicative of a consistent philosophy that is still being reiterated in the last year of the 1990s.

Secrets (1982), made up of two one act plays, (later developed into three), the second of which has a central theme of incest, was produced in the same year, both at the Maidment Theatre during the Feminist Arts Festival, and at the Mercury, where it also attracted a good deal of attention. Sandi Hall in a review in *Broadsheet* recorded the warm response of the audience to the second play in the programme with its "release of enthusiastic applause from the taut reality of that Woman's [sic] life laid bare and before us by Taylor's³² words and McRae's acting" (Hall, "*Secrets*" 46).³³

What Did You Do In The War Mummy? toured the main centres and a few smaller ones for six weeks, presenting seventy performances in all. *Setting the Table* had already been written and workshopped, but until

³² Renée at this early stage in her professional writing career was still writing under her married surname.

³³ The play was adapted for film by Diana Rowan and screened on television in August 1987. This quotation is re-printed in exactly the same format used by the *Broadsheet* article, typing errors and all, as are all other quotations from the magazine.

1982 little interest had been shown in it. Now, however, the high profile created by the *Broadsheet* revue, plus well received productions of her play *Secrets*, facilitated the production of the play. *Setting the Table* was workshopped by Mervyn Thompson, a prestigious socialist playwright and director,³⁴ and opened in late September at the Mercury Theatre in Auckland, directed by Aileen O'Sullivan.

When she first moved to Auckland from a rural area, Renée had expected to be impressed by the quality of the theatre in the big city. Instead, she was surprised to find that, especially in terms of directing, costuming and sets, "it wasn't any better than mine". She noticed especially how trivial and how few the parts for women were on the New Zealand stage (McCurdy 65-6),³⁵ so that the female condition was very sketchily represented. *Setting the Table* arose not only out of heated political debate but also because she "wanted to write a play that showed women as intelligent, humorous and strong. I wanted to write a play with very good parts for women" (Hall, "Writing the Wrongs" 33).

³⁴ Mervyn Thompson was a well-known playwright in his own right, already having written *First Return* (1974), *O! Temperance!* (1974), and *Night at the Races* (1981) (McNaughton 861). He was also an actor, and had written roles for himself in his work. (McNaughton 364). He was Artistic Director at Downstage Theatre in Wellington in (1975-6 (Thompson, "Theatre and Working Class" 21).

Sebastian Black has hailed Thompson as "the most unconventional theatrical voice the country has ever produced" ("What kind of society" 46).

³⁵ In a talk given at Massey University in 1984 Mervyn Thompson also remarked on the lack of good parts for women on the New Zealand stage:

I began reflecting on the structure of the theatre and the role of women in it. I realised that political plays, as they were written at that time, [in the early 1970s] tended to be mainly male plays. If you wanted to do a strong political programme, therefore, you were likely to end up with a predominantly male company ("Theatre and Working Class" 21).

This confirms that as well as being so scantily represented on the New Zealand stage, there were certain areas, such as politics, in which women were barely featured at all.

From its premiere production onwards, this play, which deals with the issue of domestic violence, and which opens with an act of retaliatory violence, with the attack by a female on a rapist, enraged a proportion of its audiences. Renée remembers that, “Even its first rehearsed reading [in 1981] provoked challenges from men in the audience about whether I could prove that women in Auckland were being beaten.” Many people refused to believe that women were being attacked in the home to any large extent, and were of the opinion that it “only happened to a few women who probably asked for it anyway by answering their husbands back” (Beatson 28).

Broadsheet had published a number of articles on domestic violence, and about the setting up of Women’s Refuge centres, staffed by volunteers, begun in the mid 1970s. These few “Havens” were the only refuge at that time for battered wives and children. Renée tried to point out at the rehearsed reading that often the “Havens,” such as Halfway House in Auckland, were packed to capacity or overflowing and were dealing with women from all income levels, but the audience would not believe her. “About two-thirds of the people who were there that night thought I was making exaggerated claims” (Beatson 28).³⁶ The prevalent attitude among the public and the police in the New Zealand society of the time

³⁶ Sonja Davies confirms that she found this attitude was still prevalent in the late 1980s. When she suggested to the people of her electorate in Wellington that they needed a women’s refuge, “A woman stood up and said in a cultured voice, ‘Ms Davies, there are no battered women in the Bays.’ I told her that she was wrong and said that the methods were slightly more sophisticated there. I then talked about the wife of a professional man who had had her face ironed with a hot iron, and the woman who had arrived at my front door on a Sunday morning whose husband had lost most of his money in the stockmarket crash and who had tried to run her over with his Mercedes (Davies, *Marching On* 90).

was to turn a blind eye to what it considered to be “domestic matters” conducted in the privacy of the home.

Although Renée was disappointed, and thought it a “bad mistake”, that the play was taken off after less than a two week run, despite playing to eighty-four percent houses, it nevertheless attracted a good deal of critical attention. Feminist reviewers such as Cathie Dunsford in *Broadsheet* gave it high accolades. She called it “a triumph in the herstory in New Zealand theatre” (46). Sebastian Black, a respected reviewer in the prestigious magazine the *Listener*, condemned an earlier reviewer in his own magazine who had criticised the play for being “tiresomely didactic”, and he claimed that it not only “has all the ingredients of a good play” but that “[its] value arises from the integrity with which it explores one disturbing aspect of contemporary life: the violence which men inflict on women” (“Turning the Tables” 34). Other reviews tended to sensationalise the content. The *New Zealand Herald* proclaimed “Author Aims to Shock”, and the *Auckland Star* called it an “Outpouring of Ideology.”

The net result of all this was that Renée shot to fame as a playwright because of the attention she attracted. Robert-H. Leek, the theatre reviewer of the *New Zealand Times*, drew attention to this: “Considering her relative newcomer status, Renée Taylor has had a bumper season this year...and a good deal of – mostly very favourable – critical comment in the national press.” He went on to give his opinion that

Her fine talent fully justifies such exposure and attention, but besides she is undoubtedly reaping the benefit of being the most

eloquent spokesperson of a high-profile cause: the plight of women in our supposedly free society (Leek).

Despite favourable reviews such as this, opinions about the merits of Renée's work have always varied considerably: but the controversy has at least ensured that the feminist issues that make up the body of her thematic concerns have remained at the forefront of debate, which was one of the reasons why she had set out to write in the first place. Issues cannot be resolved unless they are first exposed. In this respect, therefore, she was a success. Although she had reservations about the first run of *Setting the Table*, having "got the impression that there was some apprehension about the production" (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999), nevertheless, the three plays produced in 1982 catapulted her, in her first year as a professional playwright, on to the scene as a prominent new voice in New Zealand theatre.

Another series of three plays followed. In 1984, *Breaking Out*³⁷ and *Dancing* were written, along with her best-known work to date, *Wednesday to Come*. In perhaps its most famous production, and one which is still regarded as memorable, *Wednesday to Come* opened at Downstage in Wellington on 17 August, directed by George Webby, with Davina Whitehouse creating the definitive Granna.

None of Renée's other plays have attracted the level of controversy accorded to *Setting the Table* or the acclaim accorded to *Wednesday to*

³⁷ *Breaking Out* also contains the autobiographical element of the women being in the process of setting up a Women's Centre.

Come. John Thomson, a reputable writer on New Zealand theatre, likened the latter play to Chekhov's masterpieces and praised its "wonderful economy of writing" (58). By the time this play was written Renée was already gaining attention, not only from the media and the public, but also from the Arts establishment. *Wednesday to Come* was written with the aid of an Arts Council grant and workshopped by Playmarket.

However, in February 1984, in the same year that that play was first produced, an incident happened in Auckland that was to affect Renée's personal and professional life irrevocably. Mervyn Thompson was attacked by a group of six women, chained to a tree and had "rapist" spray-painted on his car. In some, but by no means all, respects, the attack reproduced the act of retaliatory violence with which *Setting the Table* opens. A media statement was released that claimed Thompson "represents the portion of rapists who are seldom prosecuted through legal channels because of their status as white, middle-class men" (Sabbage 14). Mervyn Thompson's name was already closely linked with that of Renée. Not only was he, like her, a working class socialist writer, but he had also worked closely with her, directing the first workshop and the first rehearsed reading of *Setting the Table*, and also on the script of *Groundwork*, a play as yet unperformed.³⁸

The attack received high-level media coverage, notably in "the **Auckland Star**, the **New Zealand Times**, **8 o'Clock**, the **Listener**,

³⁸ *Groundwork* was later performed in Auckland by Working Title Theatre in 1985 and in Wellington by a co-operative at Taki-Rua in the same year (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

radio's national programme and television's Eyewitness [sic]" (Rankine, "The Media and Mervyn" 10). Added to this, Thompson wrote an article in *Metro* which linked the attack with the play and interpreted a statement from Renée as defending his attackers. He stated in the same article that Renée was using her power of veto to prevent him from entering a theatre group called "Working Title Theatre" and that she, as a playwright, had "the most to gain" from his "theatrical demise" ("Another Life" 115).³⁹

Mervyn Thompson ran the Diploma in Drama course at Auckland University. He was also a well-established member of the New Zealand theatre community. Renée was a well-known lesbian feminist. The media and a good deal of the public took in these details and jumped to the conclusion, encouraged by the implications that Thompson had made in his article, that Renée condoned the action of the women, and that she had been directly involved in the planning of the attack, not only because she was a feminist who had been politically active in the past, but also because the attack appeared to them to reproduce the action of a play she had written. Fiction had been transformed into reality with very damaging consequences.

Thompson, then under a great deal of pressure, appears to have been compelled to resign his position. There were demonstrations against him,

³⁹ Renée adds to this,

He did not disclose that he had been hanging around her house at all hours (Richmond Road) and that she'd had to enlist the help of two male friends of hers and Mervyn's to persuade Mervyn to desist. Both Renée and Bernadette were well aware of Mervyn's propensity for giving way to sudden, and it seemed, uncontrollable rages" (Renée, personal correspondence 4 March 1999).

one of which resulted in a scheduled production of a play of his, *Songs for Uncle Scrim*, being cancelled.⁴⁰ Not only had he lost his teaching position, but many of the theatre-going community and the professional theatre performing groups turned against him. He felt ostracised, and recognised that his plays were being boycotted.

As many of his former colleagues would no longer work with him, he wrote a one-man show, *Coaltown Blues*, a dramatised documentary of the early part of his life when he was growing up in a coalmining area of Westland, and toured the country with it. The demonstrations against him continued. There were protest pickets around the theatres where he was performing. The organisers of venues that had already been booked cancelled the show.

In the article in *Metro*, Mervyn Thompson claimed that the attack had taken place “in the same area in which the play takes place” (“Another Life” 112). In an attempt to scotch the idea that the incident was linked

⁴⁰ *Songs for Uncle Scrim*, a play about the Depression of the 1930s, had been written by Mervyn Thompson in 1983. Shortly after the controversy over the attack hit the headlines, New Depot in Wellington decided to stage it, and in the volatile atmosphere of the time representatives of “Women’s refuges, Women Against Rape, the women’s sub-committee of the Wellington Trades Council and the university women’s group” met with the cast, who then decided to cancel the show. In the meantime the editor of the *Listener* had allowed Thompson to write a three page unedited article to present his point of view. A group called Women Against Sexual Harassment organised a picket by forty women on the *Listener* offices on 11 April to protest against Thompson publishing the article, and to ask for a right of reply. In an article in *Broadsheet* in June 1984 Lorna Massov confirmed that

Women Against Pornography will continue to support those women who took action against Thompson. Women are constantly the victims of rape, sexual harassment, battering and incest, and are fighting back in our own ways. The justice system has proved inadequate and uninterested in protecting women and until this situation changes other non-traditional forms of resistance must be used by women (Rankine, “The Media and Mervyn” 14).

These incidents and the quoted response give some indication of how inflamed responses to the attack had become.

with the fictitious events of the play Renée had stated in the *Listener*: “*They never said that, the media have drawn that conclusion*” (Simpson 24).⁴¹

Four years later, in an article written for *Broadsheet*, she categorically denied any involvement in, or knowledge of, the planning of the skirmish: “I told the detective...that I didn’t know the identity of any of the attackers. I still don’t”. She said the first she had known about it was when Mervyn had phoned her the next morning and told her. She and Bernadette had been just about to go off to work at *Broadsheet*. Once they arrived at the office the phone began ringing. In a climate of intense media attention, Renée was then put in a position where “Everywhere I went I was asked about the attack and treated as though I had secret knowledge. There were exceptions amongst friends and media but these were few.” At the same time, “Throughout all this time I never heard from the women who had instigated the attack. There was no offer of support nor has there ever been” (Sabbage 15). In the article she is roundly critical of those responsible for their lack of consideration for the consequences of what they had done: “I still feel angry with the women who planned and were

⁴¹ The statement in the *Listener* was included in an article “An equal slice of the cake” by Rebecca Simpson published on 15 September 1984. The full quotation reads:

‘How does she feel about *Setting the Table* being used as an inspiration for Mervyn Thompson’s abductors?’ To which question Renée replied ‘*They never said that, the media have drawn that conclusion. Those women are intelligent enough to think for themselves. They don’t need me to advise them. A lot of things were said by people who’d never read the play*’ (24).

This comment is only made in passing. The majority of the article is about the Playmarket workshop of *Wednesday to Come*. Apart from these five published sentences, Renée remained silent on the issue until her contribution to the article in *Broadsheet* in October 1988.

involved in the attack. I am highly critical of them for ignoring what would be the results for me” (Sabbage 16).

Reaction to the incident caused bitter divisions among the ranks of New Zealanders, particularly affecting feminist, academic and theatre-going communities.⁴² The echoes of it are still reverberating in some circles. Mervyn Thompson’s academic career was destroyed, and he later contracted cancer and died of the disease, still performing his one-man shows until near the end of his life. The issues were complex. Whether or not he was actually guilty of rape in the proper sense is a matter for debate still.

Renée herself was meanwhile put in the invidious position where refutation only seemed to inflame some people’s disbelief. One of the only positive outcomes of the whole sorry affair was that it helped to promote the setting up of sexual harassment policies in all the New Zealand universities.

Mervyn Thompson died in 1992. Renée, after all these years, still feels angry about the whole episode. She thinks she may well go to her grave still feeling angry about the injustice of what happened to her: “The women that did it dumped me in it. What I did was write a play. Later events had nothing to do with me personally.” Ironically, as Renée recalls

⁴² An article in *Broadsheet* reported on the response, The attack on Thompson is being fiercely discussed in the feminist movement, at universities, the theatre world and everywhere else. At one factory women workers cheered when they heard the initial radio report; others have condemned the action and sprung to Thompson’s defence (“Rape Fight Back” 10).

it, that day at *Broadsheet* the majority of those present at the office were not sorry about what had happened to Mervyn Thompson. She, however, could not condone what had been done, but her opinion was very much in the minority. Ironically, too, the two playwrights who appeared to be personally at odds, professionally had the most in common.⁴³ This affair effectively damaged the careers of the two most prominent working-class socialist playwrights in the country (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999).

Despite such troubles, however, the stream of writing continued. There had been another *Broadsheet* review, *Asking For It*, in 1983. A series of plays followed; *O It Ain't All Honey and It Ain't All Jam* (1984), *Groundwork* (1985), *Pass It On* (1986), *Union Matters* (1986), *Belle's Place* (1987), *Mercy Buckets* (1987), *Born to Clean* (1987), *Jeannie Once* (1990), *Touch of the Sun* (1991), *Missionary Position* (1991), *Te Pouaka Karaehe* (1992),⁴⁴ *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood* (1992), *Pink Spots and Mountain Tops* (1992), and *Heroines, Hussies and High High Flyers* (1993). All the plays of the 1990s apart from *Te Pouaka Karaehe* were

⁴³ Mervyn Thompson and Renée were similar in many ways, both from the point of view of their backgrounds and in their approach to the New Zealand theatre. Mervyn, like Renée, came from a working class family. His mother had committed suicide. He was used to hard work and had been a coal miner on the West Coast.

He was interested in political events that also interested her, the Depression and the 1951 lockout, for example. While at Downstage he had a policy to put on plays with good parts for women, choosing authors such as Chekhov and Sylvia Plath. He put on an adaptation of Janet Frame's *State of Siege*, as well as directing an all-female production of *Waiting for Godot* (Thompson, "Theatre and Working Class" 21).

He also wrote plays from a working class point of view and set in New Zealand, for a theatre-going public which was largely middle class, and which had a tradition of believing that real "culture" lay in literature that had been written overseas. Like Renée, he favoured including a strong musical element in his work, and he devised his own particular brand of "song play" (McNaughton 363).

⁴⁴ This play was adapted by Renée from her own radio play *The Glass Box* (1992) (McNaughton 386).

presented in Dunedin where she was then living. But after the mid eighties the Northern professional theatres did not produce her plays. Two productions which appeared at Taki-Rua in the early 1990s, *Touch of the Sun* and *Te Pouaka Karaehe*, directed by the writer, were both co-operative ventures, and were the only exception to this.⁴⁵

In the 1990s Renee has turned her attention increasingly towards the writing of novels, producing *Willy Nilly* (1990), *Daisy and Lily* (1993), *Does This Make Sense To You?* (1995) and *The Snowball Waltz* (1997). She has also written a children's novel *I Have To Go Home* (1997), a drama textbook for schools *Let's Write Plays* (1997), and a collection of comic writings *Yin and Tonic* (1998). The change in focus is partly for professional and partly for financial reasons. She could spend a lot of time and energy writing a play, only to find that as well as no professional recognition there is little or no financial return for her efforts. "It all boils down to economics. If I do write a novel it's likely I'll get it accepted. If I write a play it's unlikely I'll get it performed" (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997). Some of her plays, such as *Belle's Place*, *Mercy Buckets* and *Union Matters*, have not as yet been performed. Others, such as *Missionary Position*, have had only one professional run. She has, however, continued to be recognised by the Arts establishment, gaining seven grants or awards since 1982.

⁴⁵ Renée has also written radio plays, *Sisters To Dragons* (1994), *Diversions For An Idle Hour* (1994), an overall title for a series of three plays, *My Name is Marama Kingi*, *Rugosa Roses Are Very Hardy* and *Dreaming in Ponsonby*, and *Hard and Unfamiliar Words* (1996).

The television episodes that she has written for *Country GP* (1985) and *Open House* (1987) are outside the scope of this thesis.

Renée is noteworthy as a writer of New Zealand literature for several reasons. Although she had had a good deal of experience in writing articles, reviews and short stories and in directing amateur theatre groups, there was little indication in her background to predict her sudden and spectacular flowering as a creative artist when she was in her early fifties.

An understanding of her life is vital to the study of her oeuvre, because she has taken the influences and experiences that have shaped her and turned them into artistic creations. Sebastian Black has pointed this out: "Her perspective, partly stirred by her sense that to use an author's personal background is to reveal wider political truths...is... autobiographical" ("Renée, *Wednesday to Come*" 191).

Apart from this Renée has acted as a revolutionary influence in New Zealand literature, advocating a major shift in perspective. Her background is not just working class, it is poverty-stricken working class. This has led her to give a voice to sections of New Zealand society which have tended to be marginalised in the past. The poor and the downtrodden doing the most menial of jobs are often featured. The likes of Elsie, for example, from the first play of *Secrets*, who spends the whole of the action in a monologue, while at the same time cleaning up the men's urinal, had rarely been given centre stage portrayal before.⁴⁶ It is significant that in

⁴⁶ In *Heroines, Hussies and High High Flyers*, one of the characters, Kathryn, a schoolgirl, has an "old man [who] works on the night cart." The shame of having a father who has such an unsavoury job is outlined in the play (*Heroines, Hussies and High High Flyers* 69).

Jeannie Once the protagonist is a poor working class Irish Catholic seamstress, whereas the wealthy Mrs Larnach, of the famous family of Larnach Castle, is only ever mentioned in passing, and is never given a voice because she never appears on the stage.⁴⁷

Also, and perhaps with even greater consequences, Renée shifted the focus from the male to the female point of view. Mervyn Thompson had deliberately chosen to be involved with plays that had good parts for women. It is a salient feature of Renée's oeuvre that she has consistently written them. This has led Lisa Warrington to confirm that "Renée celebrates working class women more fully than any other playwright in New Zealand" (74). It is important to note, for example, that *Pass It On* is not only the first full length play to take as its topic the 1951 Waterfront lockout, but is remarkable for doing so from the female perspective.⁴⁸

Her espousal of the feminist cause in the mid 1970s caused her to select themes that had hardly ever been aired in New Zealand literature

⁴⁷ William Larnach (1838-98) was a wealthy banker and businessman. He was elected to Parliament in 1876 representing the City of Dunedin, and he became Colonial Treasurer and Minister for Public Works and Railways. In 1878 he went to England to float a three million dollar loan to ensure that the Bank of England would act as agents for transactions instead of the private banking houses. In 1878 he was one of the two commissioners from New Zealand to go to the Paris Exhibition. In 1879, the year in which *Jeannie Once* is set, he was awarded the C.M.G. (Scholefield 485).

Renée, however, ignores the prominent man who built a "castle" for himself and his family to live in. In keeping with her stance of concentrating on the female experience, it is only the first Mrs Larnach who is referred to in passing in the play. In 1879 Eliza Jane Larnach was an unhappy woman. The "castle" her husband had built was cold, and living there made her feel lonely and isolated. In that year her husband also decided to keep five of their six children in England to complete their education. Only the baby was left. She "desperately...missed" her children. (Sneddon 128-130).

⁴⁸ Renée developed a deliberate policy to take females that are not only marginalised, but have traditionally been treated as comic characters, and to present them as human beings worthy of serious consideration. For example Granna, in *Wednesday to Come*, became "the first old woman to be presented on the stage in New Zealand in a way that shows her as a strong character, she's actually necessary to the script – she's not just there for comic or tragic relief" (Warrington 83).

before. The central characterisations in *Setting the Table* and the second play of *Secrets*, for example, were fresh to the New Zealand stage at the time they were written. As Helen White has pointed out:

It is the initiative, the making-things-happen, that to me distinguishes 'women's theatre' from theatre that has a place ... for women to play a part. Along with that initiative comes exposure of issues and experiences that have hitherto hardly been revealed, let alone discussed, extended, explored. The 'secrets' of Renée's crucial play ... include incest and other forms of exploitation – hardly a peripheral concern in a society in which it is estimated one in five young women is sexually molested before the age of sixteen (139).

Renée has continued to pursue these themes in all of her output.

From the beginning of her professional writing career Renée has been candid about her sexual orientation. She became the first New Zealand writer to consistently portray the homosexual community, with reference to the lesbian situation in particular, often placing the latter as central to her writing.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Other feminist playwrights were quick to pick up on themes broached by Renée and there has been a cross fertilisation of ideas. Judith Dale noted in an article on Women's Theatre in 1991 "Drama by women playwrights is flourishing" (159).

Carolyn Burns' *Objection Overruled* (1982) also deals with incest but has a different focus than Renée's play *Secrets* (1982), in that it enlists the sympathy of the audience with the male, whereas the focus on the female is only sporadic (McNaughton 374). Judith Dale has also pointed out how Renée places lesbian characters centre stage: "Lesbian couples and characters are significant in many of Renée's plays: peripherally in *Setting the Table*, more fully in *Breaking Out*, covert in *Dancing*, thematic in *Groundwork*, and entirely dominant in *Belle's Place*" (175). Other feminist works featured lesbian characters, such as Hilary Beatson's *Outside In* (1982), Fiona Farrell Poole's *Bonds* (1984), Stephanie Johnson's *Accidental Phantasies* (1984) and Lorae Parry's *Strip* (1986). Rosie Scott's *Say Thank You to the Lady* (1985) has a lesbian love theme. But apart from *Belle's Place*, which has never been performed, the first "full-scale lesbian play" (Dale 159) to be put on in New Zealand was Lorae Parry's *Frontwomen* (1989).

In 1982 Fiona Farrell Poole's *In Confidence: Dialogues with Amy Bock* centred on the true story of a confidence trickster of the 1890s, who cross-dressed as a man and almost succeeded in marrying a woman for her money. This character also appears in Renée's pageant *Heroines, Hussies and High High Flyers* (1993).

Being part Maori as well as a feminist has meant that part of Renée's agenda as a writer has been to support the growing movement to provide a Maori voice on the New Zealand stage, a movement which has gathered momentum from the mid 1980s onwards. The part Maori female with a cultural identity crisis is a consistent feature of her oeuvre, as has already been discussed. Apart from having such single characterisations, within a largely Pakeha environment, *Groundwork* and *Te Pouaka Karaehe* (1992), are specifically oriented towards Maori issues. Howard McNaughton has signalled the latter play as important to the movement because "it marks a point at which the new Maori drama was becoming markedly more adventurous in its exploration of themes" (387).

When Renée burst on to the scene in the early 1980s she was a major influence in causing New Zealand theatre to take on an additional dimension. The Auckland critic, Michael Neill, claimed in 1983 that "women's theatre, drawing its energies from the born-again fervour of radical feminism, is probably the most vital force in New Zealand theatre today" (White 105). Howard McNaughton confirms in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* that Renée is "the playwright who led the move towards an uncompromisingly feminist theatre in New Zealand" (371). All this has led Joanne Tompkins to remark "various writers and performers in New Zealand ... have effectively staged feminist

Fiona Farrell Poole also wrote *Waihi 1912* (1987) about the mining strike in the town. Mary, in *Wednesday to Come* (1984) refers to this as a key experience in her life. In *Passengers* (1985) Farrell Poole examines the experience of female passengers of the 1850s and 60s emigrating from the country of their birth to New Zealand, women such as Jeannie, Mary and Margaret May who were to become key characters in *Jeannie Once*, written in 1990 (Dale 159-182).

works ... But Renée remains the best known" (249). The development of her oeuvre has caused her to become recognised, as Judith Dale has written, as being "New Zealand's most prolific and wide ranging woman dramatist" (161). In an article on Women's Theatre in 1991 Judith Dale devoted the greater part of her discussion on individual playwrights to Renée (159-182).

One of the most important effects of Renée becoming a full-time writer in her early fifties is that by then she was in a position to have worked out her view of the world. It can be argued that although her oeuvre displays a capability for development of thought, there is, nevertheless, at its centre, a consistent philosophy of life, which, at the time in which it was first expressed, was a unique voice in New Zealand writing. As a result of this, at least one of Renée's plays is to be found on most tertiary courses which deal with the subject of New Zealand drama.

Even so, as Sebastian Black has pointed out, there are still those who have been reluctant to accept her as a writer of significant note:

It took John Thomson a long time to add Renée to his list of playwrights whose work he edits so admirably in Victoria University's New Playscripts Series. Yet she has been the country's most durable woman dramatist ("Renée, *Wednesday to Come*" 190).

She is still omitted from some anthologies.⁵⁰ There is still very little published literary analysis of her work. Sebastian Black has also drawn attention to the dearth of unbiased and informed criticism:

the responses to her work have become tiresomely predictable. Some of these conceal characteristic prejudice under the pretence of critical objectivity: she writes 'little' plays because they are short; her women characters are sentimentally too good to be true; and she is dogmatically didactic. Others, again often male but now mealy-mouthed, suggest that only women reviewers can do justice to her deep humanity: a quality that a clique of her supporters, who have turned some of her Auckland first nights into man-hating celebrations, seem determined to deny her ("Renée, *Wednesday to Come*" 191).

In an interview in the *Dominion* in 1985, Renée recalled a memory from her childhood and related it to her life experience. It is a telling comment, concerning both her philosophy and the environment in which she has so often found herself to be:

After we had played for a while and were very hot we'd jump into the river and see who could swim upstream the furthest. I think I'm still swimming upstream ("Outlook" *Dominion* 9 July 1985).

⁵⁰ For example in *The Picador Book of Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*, edited by Fergus Barrowman, the introduction claims "This anthology represents New Zealand fiction published from 1979 to the end of 1994." (Barrowman vii). Janet Frame, Maurice Shadbolt, Maurice Gee, C.K. Stead, Vincent O'Sullivan, Margaret Mahy, Bill Manhire, Ian Wedde, Russell Haley, Witi Ihimaera, Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Fiona Kidman, Owen Marshall, Apirana Taylor, Sue McCauley, Keri Hulme, Lloyd Jones, Shonagh Koea, Elizabeth Knox, Fiona Farrell, Gregory O'Brien, Anne Kennedy, Barbara Anderson, John Cranna, Ngahuia Te Awakotuku, Alan Duff, Damien Wilkins, Peter Wells, Forbes Williams and Emily Perkins are included. Renée is not.

B: The Approaches of this Thesis in Relation to Renée's Oeuvre.

Renée confirmed in an interview with Lisa Warrington in 1991 that she defines herself as a “lesbian feminist with socialist working class ideals” (75). As a feminist she foregrounds the role of women, placing them centre stage in her work. As a socialist she focuses often on the working class community. As a lesbian she has an unorthodox interpretation of what constitutes the so-called “family” unit.

This thesis will attempt to examine what her works reveal about her view of the changing roles of women in New Zealand society, as seen from these three perspectives. The period under examination will range from the 1870s up to the present day. The material will be discussed in terms of the chronological sequence of fictional events, rather than in chronological order of composition. Reference will be made to almost all of Renée's accessible works to date, both in drama and in prose,⁵¹ but the main focus will be on a limited number of the most rewarding works, giving particular attention to the strong woman who assumes a leadership position.

Renée's plots often focus on events in New Zealand history which the compilers of history books and of school syllabuses have chosen to ignore.⁵² She has, as a writer, deliberately chosen to highlight injustices

⁵¹ That is, which are published, available in typescript through Playmarket, or which have been made accessible to me by Renée.

⁵² Joanne Tompkins has noted that:

which, in her opinion, have too often been swept under the carpet (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999). In both her drama and her prose she often reveals to her theatre-going audience and her readers aspects of a dark underbelly of New Zealand society of which, until this point, they will probably have been unaware.

Renée believes that creative writing should have a political as well as a personal dimension, because we all, as human beings, operate in a political as well as a personal context (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997). She hopes that by focusing on the injustices in New Zealand society, both past and present, her oeuvre will serve as an alerting mechanism (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999). As such she has assumed the role of a voice of social conscience.

Not surprisingly, the stance that she has often chosen to adopt has meant that her work has often challenged the image of New Zealand society that has been cherished by many for generations. For some the process of revelation is seen to be a tool of extremist criticism. Some are outraged at her for her choice of subject matter. Others value her work for what they perceive to be its honesty concerning the true nature of New Zealand society as they perceive it (Renée, personal interview 14 February 1999). Renée remains, therefore, a highly controversial figure in New Zealand literature, and estimations of the merit of her work vary considerably.

Renée writes strong stage roles for working-class women at key moments in working class history, specifically charting the history of women's work – that which has been generally discounted on any scale of work value (247).

Due to the challenging nature of aspects of her plots, especially in the context of the time in which the works concerned were written, most of the criticism of her output, such as there is, has tended to concentrate almost entirely on content. This thesis will attempt to redress the balance to some extent, by setting out to examine some of the techniques by which this writer has expressed her views on the changing roles of women in New Zealand society, paying particular attention to the development of recurring imagery, in order to draw some tentative conclusions concerning how this technique and others may be perceived as revealing an overall artistic philosophy.

Chapter 1: The 1870s to the 1930s

Jeannie and Iris: The Unfinished Dress, the Table and the Hammer.

Renée's best known work to date is the drama *Wednesday to Come*, written in 1984. It was immediately recognised as having the potential to become a New Zealand classic.⁵³ As such, it has been performed in all but one of the professional theatres of New Zealand, and by numerous amateur groups.⁵⁴ The play is set in the Great Depression in 1934, and Renée was eventually to make it one part of a trilogy, together with *Pass It On*, set in 1951, written in 1986, and *Jeannie Once*, set in 1879, written in 1990.

In each of these plays Renée has chosen to focus on some period in New Zealand history which was particularly grim for working class people. 1879 registered the early stages of a long period of economic depression,⁵⁵ 1934 marked the lowest ebb of the Great Depression,⁵⁶ and

⁵³ Ralph McAllister in a review in the *Dominion* predicted that the play would be a success, even when it was still in the workshop stage ("Workshop Plays Excite"). A report in the *New Zealand Herald* records the immediate impact made on those involved in it; even at the early readings "The applause after its final reading was ecstatic. Men and women cried" (Bagnall). In the week the first production opened at Downstage Renée was being likened to the great writers of the past: "Chekhov and D.H.Lawrence have moved in the same fields of pain and silence" (McAllister, "*Wednesday to Come* Out On Its Own"). The *New Zealand Times* on 26 August 1984 made the claim that "*Wednesday to Come* joins the front rank of New Zealand plays and establishes Renée as one of our finest playwrights" (Baxter and Tremewan).

⁵⁴ Howard McNaughton has noted that "*Wednesday to Come* (1984) was Renée's first work to be widely produced in both professional and university theatres" (372).

⁵⁵ *The Oxford History of New Zealand* records, "The aftermath of the crisis of 1878-9 was a severe downswing which went on into 1880 without any sign of recovery. A long period of stagnation or near-stagnation followed in many parts of the economy, lasting until 1895" (Oliver 75).

the Waterfront Lockout of 1951, which is the political focus of *Pass It On*, is regarded as leading to one of the most resounding defeats that the left wing political movement here has ever suffered.⁵⁷

By focusing attention on these three dates, it appears that the playwright has deliberately chosen to exclude from her trilogy all reference to other periods during which New Zealand came to be regarded as one of the most enlightened countries in the world in terms of legislation regarding women and the working class. For New Zealand, after all, was the first country in the world to give women the vote, and by the 1950s had one of the highest standards of living, and one of the most generous and comprehensive Welfare State systems, in the world. By directing the attention instead to these grim periods and to the social class that suffered worst from them, the author is urging her audience not to be complacent about the myths of what their country may have achieved, either socially or politically. She chooses instead to point the finger at times in history when some of New Zealand's most cherished ideals, such as the right to government by democracy, and the right of ordinary people to have a fair share in the wealth of their own country, have been blatantly contravened. To ensure that her audience may be in no doubt about the authenticity of her plots, she has chosen, too, in the programmes for her

⁵⁶ Tony Simpson in *The Sugarbag Years* has commented on the economic situation at the time: "This was the depth of the Depression: 1934" (109).

⁵⁷ *The Oxford History of New Zealand* makes the point that after the 1951 lockout New Zealand's tradition of having a low level of industrial disputes was resumed because the militants associated with the lockout had been defeated. Militant unionism was now classified as "seditious intention", which became a punishable offence after the passing of the Police Offences Amendment Act, which is described as a "potentially devastating weapon in a democracy" (Oliver 359).

productions, to present photographic evidence to verify the truth of the situations that are being presented on stage.

In this chapter I will discuss the first two works of the trilogy, in terms of the chronological order of their setting. Typically, they focus on the working class community, and place women centre stage. The chapter will begin to identify the usage of images and other techniques that Renée employs in order to express her point of view of the changing economic and social status of the working class in New Zealand, and of women in particular. Though attention will be given to the range of female characters on the stage, as representative of that of working class women, particular attention will be directed to the strong women protagonists who assume leadership roles in these plays, Jeannie in *Jeannie Once* and Iris in *Wednesday to Come*.

The Unfinished Dress

Jeannie Once is set in Dunedin in 1879 in the early stages of a period of economic depression which particularly affected recent immigrants such as those who provide the main focus for the plot. The dominant image in the play is the unfinished dress, which appears physically on the stage on Nelly, the stage prop of the tailor's dummy. As the play progresses, the dress being made on the dummy nears completion. By focusing the attention of the audience on this idiosyncratic image, Renée implies that the unfinished dress is significant to most of the female

characters, both in a physical and a symbolic sense. It comes to represent for each of them their link with the past and their aspiration for the future.

The protagonist of the title, Jeannie Brannigan, is a recently arrived Irish immigrant, a working class girl who has been trained as a dressmaker but who, because of the high rate of unemployment in New Zealand in 1879, can now only find the menial role of “being paid a pittance to sew shirts for old Pengelly!” (*JO* 21). According to Mary, her closest friend, she had been trained “at the best establishment in Dublin” and was “their star pupil in fact!” (*JO* 13).⁵⁸ Jeannie has brought Nelly, the tailor’s dummy, on the ship all the way from Ireland with her. Nelly is a key part of the equipment by which Jeannie hopes to earn a living in her new country, but she is also a part of her past life in Ireland.⁵⁹

When Honoria, the wife of the Protestant minister, brings her the commission to make the dress, Jeannie exclaims delightedly that “this might be my big chance!” (18). For the making to order of her first dress in New Zealand will enable her to demonstrate her skill in a way that has

⁵⁸ According to W.B.Sutch’s account of the categories of migrants, Jeannie would be typical of immigrants to New Zealand.

The majority of people immigrating to New Zealand from 1840 onwards were wage earners: of the first immigrants to Wellington, one in three of the men was a general labourer or farm labourer, and one in five a building tradesman. Half the single women were dressmakers or seamstresses and the other half domestic servants (70).

⁵⁹ W.B.Sutch has outlined the appalling conditions for dressmakers in England in the mid 1800s, and those in Dublin would have been presumably at least as bad. It was because of this situation that Jeannie, and many like her, would have chosen to emigrate:

The measure of the exploitation of women can be seen from the recommendations (to employers, who generally did not accept them) of the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Milliners and Dressmakers formed in 1844: a twelve hour day, a minimum wage and time off for meals. The Christian Socialists came to understand ‘that the root trouble was the enormous over-supply of workers’ and that ‘a dressmaker’s working life was not more than three or four years.’ The choice of the women was ‘between dressmaking, the streets, or the workhouse’ and this was often the sequence (21).

not been possible for her in her present employment. When the prospect of Honoria's wearing the dress in public no longer seems possible, Jeannie, still determined to make the most of what might be her "big chance," arranges with James Mowat, the local tailor, that if she can "finish the blue dress, [she] can put it in his window, with a card!" (39). The physical task of completing the dress thus becomes the practical means by which she might realise her aspiration, for the finished product on display at the Garden Party, but if not there, at least in the window of a reputable tradesman, might provide her with the stepping stone of recognition as being employable by the local community, and so be the first step towards her becoming financially independent. As she pertinently remarks to Alec, "I'm not saying that setting up as a dressmaker for changeable and picky ladies is ideal but it's a far sight better than cleaning up and waiting on them!" (34). As the dress nears physical completion on the stage, therefore, it also comes to take on a symbolic significance as the embodiment of Jeannie's economic and social aspirations.

Jeannie has her work-space in Mary O'Malley's house, which Mary also runs as a boarding establishment. Jeannie is one of Mary's strongest links with the past. They had both emigrated from Ireland on the same ship together and they both have memories of tragic personal loss.⁶⁰ Neither Jeannie nor Mary could afford to lay out the investment required

⁶⁰ Renée explained to Lisa Warrington that she wanted Jeannie to be representative of many of the working class women who emigrated to New Zealand at the time:

I knew that Jeannie wasn't just an inexperienced young girl...she's been married, and her husband has died on the ship coming out from Ireland. She's one of the many settlers – working-class people – who came out here expecting a new world, and the same old world had followed them out here. And they still wanted people to work for peanuts, and to work long hours, under terrible conditions (83).

to buy the materials for a dress of the quality of the one that Honoria orders, with its fifteen yards of taffeta, along with “twenty two pearl buttons, ten yards of satin ribbon and some lace” (14). So when Honoria arrives with her order, she represents for Jeannie a rare chance to make a sizeable profit. But Mary, as landlady, could also benefit from Jeannie’s economic success, in terms of rental if Jeannie’s business expands, and Mary herself has aspirations of becoming a financially secure businesswoman one day.

The cloth that Honoria brings to make the dress was chosen by her mother as a “parting gift” when she emigrated from Scotland, and the trimmings “are from a gown I wore when I was – young” (14). The materials therefore represent for Honoria her link with her family in Scotland, and to a happier and more affluent past.⁶¹

At the same time the contract she makes with Jeannie for the finished dress becomes the physical means by which she will realise her aspiration in her new country, for she wants to use the fine dress “to look well [at] the Combined Churches’ Twilight Garden Party” (12).

For Martha, the half-Maori half-European maid of Honoria, the dress, designed after the European style, comes to represent the European culture that has been imposed on her at the Protestant missionary school

⁶¹ The range of characterisations in *Jeannie Once* appears, according to W.B.Sutch, to be representative of certain significant sectors of the immigrant community in Dunedin at that time:

During the 1870’s more than 100,000 immigrants arrived in New Zealand; half were English, one quarter Irish, one sixth Scottish and the rest mainly German and Scandinavian. Most of them went to Otago and Canterbury...Of the single women six out of seven were servants or maids and generally the rest were cooks, seamstresses, nurses, housekeepers and laundresses (71).

where she has been brought up, and where even her name reflects only the Pakeha side of her identity. This is Martha's past, dominated by a culture which assumes that, because of her ancestry, she is of inferior status. As she wryly comments to Jeannie, she is well aware of the cultural implications of being schooled in "all the well-trained servant's accomplishments" (16). Even the Pakeha name she has been given is one for a person who humbles herself to serve others.⁶²

Martha is already displaying signs of rebelling against the culture that, while claiming to be Christian, has classified her as an inferior. She openly doubts the validity of the Bible, exclaiming, "I dislike that book!". She has even been known to "refuse to kneel" when the Reverend Wishart prays (40).

During her involvement with the arrangements for the making of the dress, Martha assumes, and is given, an equal relationship with her Pakeha employer, Honoria. When Mary asks at their first meeting if Martha "would [as a servant] be taking a seat in the kitchen while your mistress discusses her requirements with Mrs Brannigan?" Honoria insists that "Martha must stay" and be given an equal footing in the ensuing discussion because "She knows what I want. She will explain" (13). Martha's involvement with the physical process of making the dress, therefore, brings about a temporary re-definition of her status.

As the unfinished dress on the tailor's dummy moves towards completion it becomes clear that it is a complex image, linking the central

⁶² I am indebted to my supervisor Dr John Ross for pointing this out to me (see Luke 10:38-42).

characters with each other as well as to their past lives and to their aspirations for the future. Like the lives of the female characters placed centre stage, the dress is made up of elements that have been gathered from the past, which are in the process of being transformed into a fashion more suited to their vision of the future.⁶³

As a complex image the unfinished dress comes to assume for all of the women a kind of mythical status. It is this which prompts Jeannie to couch her description of the taffeta in colloquial phrases that assume the lyricism of poetry: "Such an amazing blue, sure and haven't I seen night skies like this, soft you know and the stars just coming out" (14). From near the beginning of the sequence of dramatised events, thus, the dress is associated with the image of the sky, and so to a vast and beautiful space that knows no frontiers or boundaries.⁶⁴ It is significant also that in order to try to realise their aspirations for the future, each of the four central female characters is forced, in some way, to rebel against the barriers or frontiers that the society of the time has placed upon them. The unfinished dress becomes symbolic, therefore, not only of the women's aspirations but also, ultimately, of their rebellion, Honoria against her husband's wishes, Jeannie, Mary and Martha against the role in society which they have been given, and Martha also against her servant-hood, and against the no-woman's-land of her cultural identity, where she feels herself to be

⁶³ Joanne Tompkins has also observed that the unfinished dress on Nelly is central to the symbolism of *Jeannie Once*: "The mannequin and the dress do change over the course of the play to represent the transformative possibilities that the mannequin – and the women – can possess" (248).

⁶⁴ The image of the sky is also referred to in *Finding Ruth*, again in association with the positive effects of the female bond. Ruth's childhood friend is nicknamed "Star" because her real name is Joan Twinkle.

stranded as neither Maori nor Pakeha. All these varieties of rebellion, against the institution of marriage, against the status imposed by a rigid class system and against colour prejudice, were taboo in the Victorian patriarchal society into which all these women were born.

In order to realise the physical completion of the unfinished dress which is the means by which they will realise their differing dreams, the women come to conspire together. The plot to make the dress becomes the central plot of the play. Renée presents her audience with equally strong positive and negative consequences of this conspiracy.

Perhaps the most positive outcome in the play is the suggestion that the conspiracy between the women results in a bonding between them which in the end is strong enough to begin to overcome the entrenched social prejudices which had divided them previously. In this sense the symbol of the dress is indeed representative of the sky, because contained within it is the suggestion of limitless possibility in the future.

For example, the Presbyterian Scotswoman Honoria is forced, through her desire to have the dress made, to meet and mix with the Irish Catholics, Jeannie and Mary. Previously they have lived in totally separate communities in the same town.⁶⁵ So the women begin to overcome a religious barrier that has been imported directly from their own birth countries. For even in New Zealand, as Honoria tells Martha, the

⁶⁵ According to W.B.Sutch the religions adhered to by the characters in *Jeannie Once* would be typical of the immigrant community in the New Zealand of that time:

Though Anglicans were in the majority they did not have the proportions nor quite the established position of their church in England...on the other hand there was a greater proportion of free Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists and other non-conforming religious groups in New Zealand, and also a greater proportion of Roman Catholics, who were Irish (107).

organisers of “the Combined Churches’ Twilight Garden Party” only extend invitations to “All the Protestant churches” (12) not to the Catholic church. Similarly, the barrier of colour consciousness between Jeannie and Martha is broken down when Jeannie comes to admit that both she and Martha come from essentially the same kinds of backgrounds. Jeannie apologises to Martha, at their first meeting, for being “rude” enough to be “surprised” when she learns that Martha can read and write, during the initial transactions over the dress (16). After all, as Jeannie admits, both she and Martha share a similar heritage, in that both come from illiterate parents and both have been taught to read and write in church schools.

All the women develop personally directly through the effects of the bonding. Jeannie gives Martha all her savings. This gives Martha not only the means to escape incarceration in the mental institution, but also the chance of returning to the Mahia, the home of her mother’s ancestors, in the hope of regaining the Maori part of her identity. This act of generosity also deprives Jeannie of the possibility of returning to Ireland, which at the beginning of the play she had been planning to do. By the end of the play Jeannie has “turned [herself] around” (57). She is no longer looking backwards towards memories of the mother country, but forwards towards constructing a new life for herself in New Zealand.

At the beginning of the play Mary and Honoria meet for the first time as strangers from different worlds with little in common, although they have both been living in the same town. By the end of the play Mary is able to forgive Honoria, even for not intervening to prevent Martha from being unjustly admitted to the madhouse for something that Honoria

had herself done, and had not been strong enough to own up to. At the sight of the broken and distraught Honoria at the end of the play she “softens” and offers her a seat in her home. Honoria admits to Mary that she has “betrayed” Martha (55). There are no barriers between them now. Even in a condition of breakdown Honoria had signed the note giving permission for Jeannie to visit Martha in the madhouse and so enabling Martha to escape.

Apart from a sense of guilt about having allowed Martha to be blamed for the Bible-burning, it is also the memory of Martha wanting her so much “to have the blue dress” (45) that spurs Honoria into this act of compassion. The conspiracy to make the dress, therefore, which Jeannie links from the beginning with the image of the sky, facilitates for the women the potential to enter a vast and frontierless space in which they could all grow personally from the strength of the bonding between them. However, Renée constructs a plot in which the positive outcome of personal development, accompanied by a deepening compassion in the relationships between the women, is equally strongly counterpointed by a backlash of reaction. This backlash, wielded in a climate of the onset of an economic depression, and perpetuated by a cross section of the males, who are able, if they wish, to assume positions of power over the women because they all operate in the Victorian patriarchy, is strong enough to ultimately frustrate the temporary opening up of a vision of a much wider space.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ The dress as an image appears to have been long gestating in Renée’s thought processes to carry the same connotations as the image of the dress in *Jeannie Once*

For at the end of the play, the social aspirations of each of the four central female characters, like the dress on Nelly, the tailor's dummy, remains, as Jeannie remarks, "not finished Ma'am" (56), and the social world remains dominated by the males. Martha had predicted for Honoria that "A pretty dress could be an asset" (12). Far from becoming this, it proves to be, as Honoria had feared, a bone of contention between her and her husband. Honoria questions, "What harm can there possibly be in a blue dress?" He, on the other hand, interprets the dress as "costly array" (37), and an indication that his wife has not learned to obey his wishes "in silence with all subjection" (38). The tension between their opposing views is highlighted by the issue of the dress which proves to be the last straw of stress in their relationship. Honoria will presumably never wear the dress, nor will it ever be finished, and before the end of the play she abandons the project which has so damaged her marriage and which has resulted in her emotional breakdown.

It is not only Honoria's social aspirations that are dashed. Jeannie's are also. For, as she says, "I need the dress to be seen! How else am I to attract other clients?" (29). Yet, as the dress is never finished, Jeannie never ever gets to have it seen at the garden party, nor even simply to display it in anyone's window. Instead it seems most likely that she will

(1990). As early as 1960 she had written a short story published in *Arena*, "The Last Stand," in which the wife, Grace, decides to attend a social occasion without her husband in a new dress which is described as "beautiful. A pale misty green with a matching petticoat" ("The Last Stand" 14). When Henry, her husband, arranges to go out to a meeting on that same night, so that she will have to stay at home and mind the children, Grace stands up to him. In the end the only way he can prevent her from leaving the house is to destroy the dress, which he does in a fit of anger. Thus the dress, albeit of a different colour, comes to be symbolic of the wife's social aspiration which is both literally and figuratively destroyed by the husband.

go to work as a domestic servant for the wealthy Mrs Larnach,⁶⁷ “Darning and mending” (33). This position offers Jeannie the possibility of personal security through marriage and financial security because it could be a permanent position, but as she predicts, it effectively puts paid to her hopes of ever becoming a recognised tradeswoman in her own right, because, as she perceptively comments, “if Mrs Larnach or her daughters want new gowns they don’t go to the woman who patches their sheets!” (34).

Although Jeannie is paid for the work she has done so far, because the dress is never finished, it can never make the profit hoped for by either Jeannie or Mary. At the end of the play we are left uncertain as to how Mary will fare in the future. Not only is she financially no better off, but her best friend and helper Jeannie, once she marries Alec, will have to move away, so she will lose not only emotional support but also the rental for Jeannie’s work space, and the income from two of her boarders. We never know for certain whether she will continue with her present lifestyle or decide to resume her stage career with George Lamont. Similarly, even though Martha is optimistic about her future, we never know her fate after she takes Jeannie’s money and leaves for the Mahia Peninsula.

The main agency of this negative backlash which undermines the conspiracy of the women to make the dress, and thwarts their social

⁶⁷ *Jeannie Once* was written during the time that Renée was living in Dunedin and a holder of the Burns Fellowship. The play was thus originally designed, in the first instance, for Dunedin audiences. The association of the city with the poet Robert Burns would be common knowledge to most of them. Some of the audience would have some knowledge of the history of the city. The Larnach name would also have reverberations for many of those watching the play. *Jeannie Once* had its world premiere at the Fortune Theatre, Dunedin, on 15 June 1990, and was directed by Lisa Warrington.

aspirations, is the opposition of some of the male community, acting either as individuals or communally as part of the patriarchal institution. The Reverend Wishart never appears on stage. This makes the consequences of his unequivocal condemnation of his wife's rather tentative act of self assertion seem even more chilling to the audience, because they cannot develop any empathy with an unseen, off-stage presence who is portrayed as so unflinchingly destructive. We witness only the result of his crushing judgement in his wife's state of nervous breakdown, which places the sympathy of the audience firmly in her arena.⁶⁸

Jeannie's marriage to Alec effectively traps her into taking a position which thwarts her aspiration of becoming financially independent. Jeannie protests strongly to Alec at the beginning of the play that she never wanted to get married in the first place. She tells Alec firmly in the first Act, "I don't intend to marry again," and, "I am not interested in Marriage!" (22).

It is Mary's involvement with a married man which had led to the accidental killing of his wife, the effect of which has been to banish Mary from her homeland and to destroy her career as a Music Hall entertainer.

With instances such as these Renée appears to be suggesting that the institution of marriage often leads to the curtailing or thwarting of female

⁶⁸ Renée explained to Lisa Warrington why she chose to use the theatrical technique of the unseen off-stage presence for this character:

I felt his presence, just the unseen presence, was – I didn't feel any actor could do it. To make him as awful and yet as nice and – to make him the Jamie that Honoria once had. Maybe a bit stiff and conservative, but he obviously had some nice qualities. And then for him to be destroyed, and then to go around destroying other people all in the name of God. I felt I preferred the brooding thing hanging over the play, or over those parts of the play than to try and get a real person to do it (87).

aspirations. There are no happy marriages portrayed in *Jeannie Once*. The Reverend Wishart, Diccon, Mary's former married lover, and even the benign Alec, who is about to be married to Jeannie at the end of the play, all confine and thwart their women in one way or another.

Renée is also condemning in her portrayal of the male, operating collectively in the form of patriarchal institutions. The Reverend Wishart represents the negative individual male force when he judges Martha to be guilty of the destruction of his Bible without any evidence. His injustice is reinforced by the collective male force, represented by the police who arrest her, and ultimately by the whole system of Law and Order which incarcerates her in the madhouse as punishment for her perceived rebellion. Not only is Martha innocent of any crime but she is never allowed to defend herself: the consequence of her being accused illustrates how the patriarchal structure of society is maintained by the mechanism whereby anyone rebelling against its official religion is classified as being insane.⁶⁹

However, the patriarchal system operating in New Zealand in 1879 is shown to be merely a reflection of the system that operated in the homelands of the immigrant community. The police force and judges in Ireland never bothered to unravel the true facts about the death of Mary's lover, Diccon's, estranged wife. Diccon was condemned and hanged for a crime he had never committed. Renée suggests by instances such as these that it is not only working class women, but also working class men, who

⁶⁹ Howard McNaughton identifies in *Jeannie Once* "a theme of institutionalised oppression through the use of asylums as a facile solution to societal discord" (372).

suffer from the lack of compassion and stupidity of male-dominated institutions based on a British system of justice which is, in effect, callously unjust to the working class as a whole and to the Irish in particular. Their effects on the men, however, are only mentioned in passing in the play, whereas, by contrast, their effects on the women are given centre stage attention. Hence, whereas one part of Renée's subtext in this play may be an indictment against the institution of marriage, another may be that the male-dominated institutions such as the system of Law and Order and the Churches display a singular lack of the values that they purport to sustain. This is placed in direct contrast to the interactions between the women, which become increasingly fair and accordant with the Christian values of love and mutual respect as the play progresses.

So despite the growing compassion and the superior morality displayed by the deepening bond between the women, the combined effect of the individual and the collective male threats, acting as a backlash against them, is sufficient not only to render the aspirations of the women futile, but effectively to rend the group physically asunder. The possibility of the vast and frontierless space in which all can grow, symbolised by the image of the blue dress, which carries with it connotations of the sky, is effectively invalidated by the end of the play. Thus on the stage the sabotage of the women's aspirations is encapsulated symbolically in the action of Honoria when, in a state of emotional breakdown in which she can barely recognise the rest of the group, she takes down the unfinished dress from Nelly, the tailor's dummy, and carries it away with her. There

is no indication that the bonding she had previously formed with the other central female characters present on the stage will be sustained.

Those of different social status and different religious persuasions will once again settle back into living their lives completely separately from one another. Jeannie will have to move away when she marries Alec. Martha will have to move even further away. Although she assures her friends, "I will tell my children about you...I will not forget you" (58) there is no suggestion that she will ever see them again.

The possibility of a new order, based on female values, which glimmered momentarily as a possibility, has been snuffed out. The old order of patriarchy has been resoundingly re-established. The blue dress is not only never finished, it has now been removed from the stage. Only Nelly, the tailor's dummy, remains on the set.⁷⁰

The Table

The second play in the trilogy, *Wednesday to Come*, is set in the Great Depression and specifically dated "early spring in 1934" (*Wednesday to Come* 7).⁷¹ Working class women are once again placed

⁷⁰ All of Renée's accessible works to date include aspects of the plot which illustrate the male, acting either individually or collectively within the patriarchal institution, in the process of thwarting the aspiration of the female. Even in *Pink Spots and Mountain Tops*, a play written for children, the only male character, Doctor Mendbones, is thwarting the central character Annabel's "dream" of going to the mountains, because she is in a wheelchair (*Pink Spots and Mountain Tops* 14).

⁷¹ Tony Simpson calls his account of the Depression of the 1930s *The Sugarbag Years* and has outlined in detail the lifestyle of many New Zealanders at that time:

Conditions for many people were desperately hard. In all towns and in many country centres food and clothing were being distributed to the destitute. It was the year of the sugarbag. Every week you'd see the father of a needy family trudging to the centre with his empty sugarbag for his handout. Such a handout would be anything anyone could spare for destitute families. (109).

centre stage. This time four generations of women from the same family, Granna, Mary, Iris and Jeannie, cohabit in a single household.⁷²

Viewed from Renée's perspective, working class women are seen to have made no social or economic progress from the Dunedin of 1879 to the Great Depression or, whatever they have made has been lost. For their position in society, as represented by this household, may be said to have been degraded. The kitchen table that is central to the action throughout is a dominant image of the play, and comes to represent the women's lack of economic or social status.⁷³

There were two tables in evidence in the household interiors in *Jeannie Once*, both in the house of Mary O'Malley. The first was that in the work space, which Jeannie was using in making the dress which she hoped would establish her reputation as a dressmaker in the local community. The second was that in Mary O'Malley's kitchen at which she fed her boarders in the hope of making a living for herself. Both tables accordingly represent the means by which these two central characters hope to achieve their aspirations towards a financial security which will, in turn, improve their social status. Thus these tables are associated with qualities of energy and initiative. The kitchen table in *Wednesday to Come* amalgamates the functions of the two tables in the previous play. It

The sugarbag is a significant stage prop in this play. The dead man's belongings are brought home in a carton and a sugarbag. Ted carries in the beer in a sugarbag towards the end of the play, just before the funeral.

⁷² Renée has explained her reasons for choosing to portray such a wide age range of women on the stage: "I also wanted to have some generations on stage because I'd never seen any old women on stage and very few young ones. And 13 is probably about as young as you can get away with, with adult actors" (Warrington 68).

⁷³ W.B.Sutch has noted how, "In the countries of capitalism the gradually improving economic and social status of women was slowed down in the depression of the thirties – as much in New Zealand and Australia as in Britain and the U.S.A." (43).

provides both a work surface and a surface for serving food. It becomes the focus, not for the exercise of energy and initiative, but for exercising stoicism in the face of deprivation.⁷⁴

Despite the worsening economic times and the increasing unemployment in Dunedin in 1879, Mary O'Malley is said to be famous for her "stew [which] would keep a man going for days at a time" (*JO* 22), and in *Jeannie Once* we see her serving it. The same problems of economic hardship and continuing unemployment that were worsening in 1879 recur for the working class in the early 1930s. As Granna, who is the Jeannie of the previous play, grown to be an old woman, comments grimly, "Hard times back there – hard times here. Nothing's changed ... nothing's changed..." (*WTC* 10). Renée makes it clear, through comments like these, that in her view the change in the position of women in New Zealand society between the end of the nineteenth and the third decade of the twentieth century has not been progressive. It is also made clear, by comparing the tables in the two different plays, that the standard of living for the average working class family has, in fact, deteriorated. We never see meat being served in this play. The most that Iris can offer Ted, her brother-in-law, after a gruelling drive to bring back her dead husband in

⁷⁴ In accordance with her philosophy to place women centre stage, Renée indicates here, perhaps, the reason why the kitchen, and its table, have featured so predominantly in her work: "kitchens are definitely women's world. There great struggles for survival are fought and lost (or sometimes won), there is diminishment, anguish, joy, support, compromise" ("Theatre and Politics" 17). She has also explained that she wanted to portray on the stage an alternative to the traditional setting for a New Zealand play: "For a lot of us the most dramatic things in our lives have happened in the kitchen. And I felt it was a place that needed to be used on stage...I like the stuff that lies under ordinary things, and so that's probably another reason why I chose the kitchen" (Warrington 85).

his coffin, is bread and jam.⁷⁵ Although, admittedly, it is breakfast time, this is hardly a substantial meal for a man who has driven through most of the night. No working class family would offer a man in these circumstances anything but the best they had. So the subtext makes it clear to the audience that there is no surplus at this table, not even for other members of the family, but rather barely enough to serve the immediate needs of the household. The underlying tension that is caused in this household by the limited supply of food makes the insistence of the women on feeding the marchers even more poignant, for clearly what they so generously give away is what they themselves will have to do without. This family is obviously one of the “thousands” whom Dot says are “everywhere [in New Zealand]...who’ll go to bed tonight without a decent meal” (25). This statement alone is a stark presentment of one of the fundamental facts of life of the times, which have prompted representatives of the common people to band together and march in protest about their living conditions; and Dot is one of their number.⁷⁶ Dot comes to meet the family when she comes to the door to ask for hot water. The hunger march has stopped to rest half way between Palmerston North

⁷⁵ Renée has acknowledged the autobiographical element in the conception of this play: “I suddenly thought about my uncle driving my father’s body back from Wellington to Hastings because they couldn’t afford a hearse” (McCurdy 68).

⁷⁶ A reviewer of *Wednesday to Come* printed a quoted complaint from the leader of the real-life marchers reprinted in the *Evening Post* on 10 February 1934. It referred to the bad publicity they had been given by being labelled as a “band of irresponsibles”. It also gives a clear insight into the living conditions of the unemployed at that time, made clear by the leader of the Gisborne relief workers, Mr C. Jennings:

Every possible constitutional method had been adopted without avail. We had no other way of making our protest other than that adopted...we couldn’t bear to see the suffering that our women and children were compelled to endure. In the outlying camps children are going about in sugar-bag trousers and the women are wearing under-clothes made from flour bags. In many homes there is no such thing as a mattress (Coke).

and Wellington in the last stages of their journey to walk to the capital.⁷⁷ As a mark of respect and sympathy for Dot and for her cause, the women give her instead the best that they have to offer, which is hot tea with hot buttered scones and jam.⁷⁸ It is not that the country has any less economic potential than it had in 1879. As Dot says, “We grow enough food in this country to feed everyone,” to which Iris retorts, “Twice over” (25). The comment becomes even more pertinent when it becomes clear that even the butter the women put on the scones is a rarity in this household. The only reason that the family has any to offer is, as Mary says, because the marchers have been “just lucky – we got some cream given to us and I made some butter” (25). This remark is particularly striking because it comes in the script just before Dot and Iris comment about the food surplus in New Zealand. There would hardly be a member of any New Zealand audience who would not know that New Zealand is a major butter exporting country.

On the opposite side of the kitchen table we see Mary ironing the laundry that the women take in to eke out their meagre household funds. Once again the table in the play becomes the representation for deprivation when compared to its function in the previous play. There is no indication that any of the women in *Wednesday to Come* has been trained to the level of skill that Jeannie, who is now Granna, once had.

⁷⁷ Tony Simpson records that on the way to Wellington from Palmerston North, at Levin the marchers stayed at one of the camps, and at Otaki there were “good meetings”. Otaki is thus the probable location for the play (144).

⁷⁸ Tony Simpson reports the marcher’s recollection of how they were fed along the route, which corresponds to the details in the play: “People donated food for us on the way, all types...kerosene tins full of tea...mostly from ordinary workers who’d come out to the assistance of the unemployed” (145).

Even if they had been there are no jobs for them. So in these circumstances they have come to represent the lowest level of unskilled casual labour, which is consequently the worst paid. As Iris says: "We can't keep us all on what we get from doing someone's dirty washing" (10).

Neither does the play offer us any suggestion that the female labour force will regain the skills base that has been lost, for young Jeannie, great-grand-daughter and namesake of the central character in the previous play, has been forced to leave school at thirteen because the family can no longer afford to keep her there. She is now in the same position that her mother, Iris, once was. Iris can see no change in the conditions which once faced her, and which she now sees facing her children, a curtailing of childhood because of being thrust at an early age into the work force: "I grew up when I was twelve. Took me six months. And nothing was ever quite the same again. It's going to be the same with Cliff and Jeannie, only for them it's a few days" (38). The most that young Jeannie can aspire to is a "live in" position (10) of the same kind that the Jeannie of the previous play ended up taking with Mrs Larnach, and one which Jeannie Brannigan regarded as putting an effective end to her economic and social aspirations.

In *Wednesday to Come* the female-dominated space is even more in evidence than in *Jeannie Once*. The whole of the action takes place in the interior of a single house, most of it taking place in the traditional female domain of the kitchen, and one vital episode in the sitting room of the same house. For the women's lack of economic and social status has

effectively confined them within four walls. The only time, throughout the whole play, that we see them leave the house, is to attend a funeral. In *Jeannie Once* we see or hear of Jeannie going out and about in her world. Trying to encourage Margaret May O'Connor out of her depression, wrangling with "old Pengelly," scheming to have her dress displayed in James Mowat's window, rescuing Martha from the madhouse, she is essentially an active force, an embodiment of energy and initiative. She believes she has the right, albeit with varying degrees of success, to try to change the forces that shape her world.

Iris, the protagonist in *Wednesday to Come*, has lost that belief. She does not participate in the protest march to Wellington although she does consent to Cliff and young Jeannie doing so. Apart from the fact that she has got work to do, she does not believe it can achieve anything, in a country where the work force has come to be regarded by the Government as having a less than human status. The unemployed are being treated literally as draught animals, and, as Iris says, "The people who put a harness on a man and break him are not going to listen to a group of unemployed who say it's wrong. Coates has already told us to eat grass" (32). Iris does not believe that she can do anything to alter the forces that have caused her husband, Ben, to be sent away to a work camp for the unemployed, where conditions are so harsh that he has been driven to commit suicide.⁷⁹ The most she will concede is to allow the marchers to

⁷⁹ Tony Simpson has recorded that "A rule insisted that no wives or families were to be in camp" (110). The *Oxford History of New Zealand* records the dire plight of the unemployed at the time:

The chief victims of conservative policies were the unemployed ... Government policy on unemployment was dominated by Forbes's conviction that the 'dole'

put Ben's name on their banners as an example of the injustices that have been perpetrated on the people they represent, and to allow them to attend his funeral as a mark of respect, and even this she does reluctantly. She gives no indication that she believes that either of these gestures on her part will have the slightest effect in the wider scheme of things.

All the four central female characters in *Jeannie Once* participate to some degree in the social world that surrounds them. By way of contrast, the women in *Wednesday to Come* can only view this world from the confinement of their household interior. Their economic and social deprivation, symbolised by the kitchen table at which they labour, has effectively caged them.⁸⁰ The events that are happening in the outside world only become a reality for them when they arrive at their door. The hunger march materialises when Dot comes to ask for water and the harsh conditions in the labour camps are brought home to them by the arrival of Ben in his coffin, brought by Ted who brings news of what is happening in the outside world.⁸¹

Renée insists in her directions to the actors that "It is important that the life of the household goes on during the action of the play, There is

was demoralising: the jobless should work for their benefits ... As the numbers of unemployed grew it became more and more difficult to find suitable work ... Wages were reduced, work was rationed, and camps ... were established in country areas ... poverty was more than local relief agencies, both public and private, could handle (Oliver 223).

⁸⁰ W.B.Sutch has commented on the confinement of women in the 1930s: "During the 'twenties and even the 'thirties all women, [in New Zealand] but especially married women, were heavily downgraded economically [and] became almost cemented to their minor role" (123). Minimal though the provisions for men in the work camps were, no direct provision was made for women at all.

⁸¹ In "The Last Stand", a story published as early as 1960, (see Note 66) the table is already becoming associated in Renée's work with domesticity and confinement. At the end of the story, after being effectively caged within the house by her husband, the wife "started to clear the table" ("The Last Stand" 16).

washing and ironing to be done, washing to be folded, dishes to be washed, the stove to be tended” (*WTC* Author’s Note). Mary and Iris rarely stop working, but their near-constant labour only serves to emphasise their powerlessness in the face of a deteriorating economic situation to which they can foresee no end.⁸² Their work, like the lives they live, has become a treadmill. One of the most original bits of business in this play is the possibility for the actual baking of scones on stage. But even this creative act is given connotations of loss because, as Iris recalls, “I remember when Dad died we stayed up all night. About one in the morning mum made some scones” (19). The making of the scones becomes in the play a ritualistic expression of grief, performed at a table which is itself a representation of deprivation of skills, of opportunity, of freedom, of a loved one, and of a belief in the power of the individual to change things. The energy and aspiration associated with the tables in *Jeannie Once* has been denuded into a stoical resilience in the face of adversity by the four generations of women gathered around this kitchen table.

The Hammer

Yet, from this very position of powerlessness, effectively caged and deprived of economic or social status, it is working class women who,

⁸² Lisa Warrington has noted Renée’s technique of using silence and actions to convey her subtext as much as words:

Dialogue which seems excessively spare on the page...takes on a powerful mood and rhythm on the stage, with silences filled by the purposeful carrying out of repetitive domestic tasks. As we watch these women at work, we begin to understand the simple heroism of their lives (74).

from Renée's point of view, exhibit the first signs of rebellion against the circumstances in which they find themselves. The playwright symbolises the first stirrings of this rebellion through her manipulation of the image of the hammer. The sight of her dead husband's coffin being carried into the house acts as a catalyst for Iris, spurring her from resigned acceptance into defiance. Her brother-in-law Ted's view of his circumstances is passive. He is still, at least, in the relatively privileged position of having a job, even though salaries and wages had been reduced by government decree.⁸³ He accepts the situation. "It's the depression Iris," is his explanation for everything that happens and "Everyone's in the same boat" (*WTC* 15). Iris, on the other hand, is of a very different opinion. She perceives very clearly, even from the prison that is her home, and looking at the world from inside out, that she lives in a very unequal society where "some people get their washing and ironing done and other people have to do it" (15). Iris has not lost her sense of justice, and her opinion on this situation is uncompromising: "Well it's wrong" (15).

Even when Ted has to bring back his dead brother's body in a home-made coffin, and in conditions of dire poverty, he can find no anger in himself against these circumstances, even in the face of such personal

⁸³ The *Oxford History of New Zealand* outlines the deteriorating standard of living even for those in regular employment at this time, which was due to the Government's deflationary policies:

As important as unemployment, and indeed partly a cause of it, was the Government's attack on wages. Early in 1931 Forbes cut civil service salaries by 10 per cent. He then introduced legislation empowering the Arbitration Court to amend any award before expiry if economic circumstances warranted. In June 1931 the Court reduced all wages by 10 per cent...The I.C. and A. Amendment Act...was followed by wholesale wage cuts...The combination of unemployment and Government intervention rendered trade unions almost powerless to defend the interests of their members (Oliver 222-3).

loss.

Ted, unlike the women, has seen at first hand the conditions that his brother was in at the work camp with its “Tents, dirt floors, everything wet through. And cold – never felt cold like it” (17). Ted already knows, before the women find out, that his brother has been harnessed like a draught horse and made to pull a plough, and that it was desperation brought about by these circumstances, that had driven him to commit suicide. When the harness that has been put on him in the camp is taken out of the carton of Ben’s belongings in the second Act,⁸⁴ the opposing viewpoints of Ted and Iris are highlighted. Iris’ reaction to the piece of apparatus that has resulted in tragedy for her family is to look at it “*carefully*” and to ask “What is it? What is it Ted?” (31). Ted’s reaction is to try to take it outside and hide it before anyone sees it.

Ted, to do him justice, is only trying to protect the family in what he considers to be the best way, but even though he is well meaning, his presumption that the women need to be “protected” from the harsh realities of life is both patronising and demeaning. In the end his attitude changes, and he declares that he is “going to show the marchers that harness”, and that, “There must be something they can do” (32). Yet even when Ted does take some kind of retaliatory action, he still sees the

⁸⁴ In 1931 a Labour Party advertisement showed unemployed men dragging a chain harrow across a field with the slogan “Relief Workers Cheaper Than Horses!” (Simpson 76). In the first production of the play at Downstage Renée provided photographic evidence to verify the social outrages that had taken place at the time.

solution in terms of other people taking the ultimate responsibility for protest out of his hands.⁸⁵

Thus the counterpoint to Ted's passivity, the stirring aggression in Iris, becomes ironic. For the play's most potent image is Iris forcing open the lid off the dead man's coffin. Iris, unlike Ted, is determined to face up to the reality of the disastrous loss of Ben. Soon after the coffin had been carried into the house she had rejected Mary's attempt to cover it up with a shawl: "We won't cover it up...just yet" (12). Likewise, Iris will not allow the facts to remain hidden from herself or from her family. When she "*picks up the hammer*" and the audience hears "*the wrenching of nails away from wood*" (37), she is in effect taking events into her own hands for the first time, both literally and symbolically.

Until this point she has been the passive victim of outside forces that arrive at her door. The first thing she had noticed about the coffin had been that "The lid's closed" (11). The closed lid of the coffin hiding the horrific reality of her husband's dead body means that outside forces have once again dictated the limits of her knowledge. Ted's attitude towards that limitation had once again been passive. "They said it was better," he explains to appease her, "in the circumstances, they said" (11). Iris sneers at Ted's euphemism for suicide by hanging: "'Circumstances' – that's a good way of putting it" (11). As with the harness, Ted sees the key to survival in the evasion of the brutal reality he lives in. Iris, on the other

⁸⁵ Renée has acknowledged the autobiographical element in the creation of Ted: "I know dozens of Teds in my family...it seems to be the sort of conservative male – inarticulate in some ways, but very solid, very supportive really" (Warrington 87).

hand, in wrenching off the coffin lid, performs her first act of defiance against the anonymous “they” of society who have so far determined the circumstances of her world. For this single distinctive act functions as a watershed in the play, suggesting for the first time the possibility of an opposing philosophy: that the key to survival lies in first revealing and then dealing with the harsh reality that she lives in. The anger that Ted has been unable or unwilling to locate in himself, Iris finds increasingly in herself: “I’m angry, I admit that” (26).

The elder Jeannie at the end of *Jeannie Once* had recounted her father’s metaphor for the business of living: “My Dadda used to say that life was a man waiting round the corner with a hammer so you always have to be on the lookout. It was like that at home and it’s like that here” (*JO* 57). Picking up the hammer imbues the physical stage object with the connotations of the metaphor. The action thus represents Iris’ decisive attempt to challenge that “man” whom the working classes have traditionally interpreted, as Dadda’s metaphor indicates, as a force which, as far as they are concerned, is not only aggressive but also life threatening. This is a force which is usually kept concealed from them, but which may still attack at any time without reason or warning. By implication, and through the juxtaposition of the image of the hammer in the two different plays, Renée suggests that it is women like Iris who are preparing to wrest the “hammer” from that “man”, or, in other words, to attempt to reverse the process, so that those who have been oppressed now begin to challenge the traditional oppressor.

For the destructive force of the collective male-dominated establishment, as representative of that power structure, with its potential to destroy the aspirations of women, is just as much in evidence in *Wednesday to Come* as it was in *Jeannie Once*. Renée used the device of the ominous off-stage presence to suggest to the audience the destructive force of the individual male in a position of power in the person of the Reverend Wishart in *Jeannie Once*. In *Wednesday to Come* she uses a similar device to suggest the ominous presence of the collective male-dominated power structure. Soon after Ted enters he makes the comment that he has been delayed because he has met up with the marchers on his way back and that he has been told by them that the “Army had the guns out at Palmerston North” (*WTC* 13).⁸⁶ The association of the army and its weapons with the marchers would make the audience gather that the armed forces were called in to intimidate, or even to crush, the protesters. Yet the marchers, after all, had a perfect right to make a peaceful protest in a country which claims to be a democracy. This anonymous off-stage presence appears again in the form of the police force at the end of the play. “Old Batkin on his bike” (47), made non-threatening by the details of his age and his form of transport, and perpetrating the image of the benign small-town copper, has been replaced, according to Dot, by “city cops travelling with us” (47). They, in contrast to their predecessor, interpret

⁸⁶ Tony Simpson verifies this detail of the script in *The Sugarbag Years*. Under a photograph of the real-life marchers the caption reads,

The Gisborne unemployed were probably the best organised in New Zealand. After a successful week of demonstrations in Gisborne they prepared to march on Wellington to demonstrate their despair. On the way they were met with offers of coffee from farmers and the army with machine guns in Palmerston North (143).

the mark of respect that the marchers are trying to show the dead man, by congregating at his funeral, in the worst possible light, assuming that “there’ll be a riot” (47-48), and on this basis contemplating further action: “They’re getting reinforcements” (48). By implication the audience is urged to wonder why ordinary people should not have the right to attend a funeral, and why it should be assumed that in doing so they intend to break the law. Admittedly, in putting Ben’s name on their banners the marchers are turning their presence into a “political” action, but it is a perfectly legitimate one.⁸⁷ They may also go on to wonder why the police need these reinforcements at all when no law has been broken, and whether the police force or army are behaving in a way which indicates that New Zealand is, in fact, being run in a democratic manner.⁸⁸ So the army and the police force are portrayed as ominous and anonymous off-stage presences employed by those in power, who threaten the aspirations of working class men and women. It is interesting to note also that Renée personifies the aspirations of the marchers not as male, which the majority

⁸⁷ Tony Simpson outlines the formation of the Unemployed Workers’ Movement which was formed to improve the lot of the unemployed by working for

better tools, better rates of pay, better rations where rations were part of the relief scheme, fewer people sent to the unemployment camps, eliminating the married men, not sending them to unemployment camps...That is you would not call the movement itself a radical movement (135).

The marchers, who were chosen from all the surrounding relief and railways camps from the Gisborne area were in support of the movement for these improved conditions (143).

⁸⁸ Tony Simpson records how remarkably restrained and self-controlled the marchers were, despite their desperation. They refused to be drawn into any kind of violent reaction, even when provoked. Simpson quotes from one of the marchers recalling his experiences in Palmerston North:

they [the representatives of the government] tried to create a riot scene there, with soldiers in the background and machine guns and whatnot. Some of the spectators threw tomatoes and eggs and that, but this was uncalled for by the unemployed because we didn’t believe in unnecessary provocation. The police tried to hustle us about but we formed a very tight formation (144).

of them would have been, but as female through the stage presence of Dot Harkness, in keeping with her philosophy of placing women centre stage.

Iris, in picking up, and using, the hammer, is not only overcoming her own social conditioning which has pervaded her life with a sense of utter powerlessness, but is transferring the proactive role from the “man” of Dadda’s metaphor to herself on the stage as representative of the working class female.

Through this most potent image in the play, the hammer and the coffin become inextricably linked in association with connotations of death. One interpretation of this compound image could be that the image of the coffin itself has come to symbolise a kind of dying that is taking place within the relationships of the traditional nuclear family.

In *Jeannie Once*, despite a subtext that warned women of the dangers of the male in general whether acting as an individual or collectively, there was still some sense of the possibility of equality, of companionship and sharing in the relations between men and women in some instances. Alec views marriage to Jeannie in this light, saying “I want us to be together, job or no job. You know that” (*JO* 35) and, if he does get a job on Mrs Larnach’s estate, the cottage he will be entitled to will be “Small ... but it would be ours” (34).

In *Wednesday to Come* it appears that one of the effects of the degrading of the women’s economic and social status has been to polarise the lives, and therefore the experiences, of men and women. By the end of *Jeannie Once* both Alec and Jeannie are hoping to become part of the employed work force. In *Wednesday to Come* the work place has become

a male preserve. The only person with a job in *Wednesday to Come* is Ted, the brother-in-law of Iris. Taking in washing does not give Iris or Mary the status of those in permanent employment. Even the work camps for the unemployed, which Ben is sent to, and Cliff is likely to go to, are for men only. Women are not officially considered to be part of the employable work force. The effect of this is to confine them to the home and to household tasks, as is reflected in the set of the play. If the domestic world in *Wednesday to Come* has become even more the domain of the female, then the external world has become even more the domain of the male than it was in *Jeannie Once*, and is now mainly outside the experience of working class women as represented by the central characters in this play, although other subsidiary characters, such as Dot Harkness, seem to be more involved in it.⁸⁹ The polarisation of the lives and experiences of the male and the female has caused a sense of splitting that is both economic and emotional. There is not the same sense of sharing between the sexes in *Wednesday to Come* that there was in *Jeannie Once*. This is reflected both in the action and in the set. Cliff and Ted do not generally join in the household chores, but Jeannie does. The most Cliff is asked to do, apart from carrying out a basket of washing at the beginning of the play, is help take the heavy kerosene tin of tea out to the marchers. Ted brings in the wood and the coal for the fire, but having done so, does nothing with them. Iris makes a biting comment on his ineptitude in realising what

⁸⁹ However, the range of female characters in the play would seem to be representative of the social and economic conditions of the time. Tony Simpson records that there were four women on the march (148).

needs to be done in order to keep the household ticking over: “God, suppose he thinks the fire’ll bank itself” (*WTC* 49). Muscle power, however, is still a male preserve. Ted digs his brother’s grave.

Music as A Reflection Of Theme

One of the important techniques Renée employs, therefore, to express her point of view of the changing role of women in New Zealand society, is in the development of images such as the unfinished dress, the table, the hammer and the coffin, which link together works written at different times and with different chronological settings. Another technique she often employs is to incorporate a musical dimension into her work which acts as a reflection of her thematic foci. She generally uses a genre that has strong associations with the working class. Often this is in the form of a musical revue, but she has also experimented with a variety of other musical expressions.⁹⁰ The contrast between the values of working class women and the patriarchy, for example, is a major theme of *Jeannie Once*, and this is reflected in the music.

The scenes which centre around the Music Hall performers make up a strong element in the play,⁹¹ and the Music Hall is portrayed as a

⁹⁰ Howard McNaughton has commented on this: “Like Roger Hall, Renée has incorporated into several of her plays techniques derived from her early experience of scripting revues, and these help to relieve their generally monochromatic realism” (372).

⁹¹ Renée has commented that it was the vitality of the theatre of the time that was a major influence in her choice of setting:

I think one of the reasons that I wanted to set it in Dunedin – was that the theatrical life then was wonderful. It was because of the gold rush, and because of wanting entertainment, but it was still going on in 1879, and the more you read about that time, the more you realise how much we’ve lost, because it’s not half as lively now (Warrington 84).

predominantly male preserve. It is the male, through the characters of George and Barney, who is literally given a "voice". Bessie Marchmont, the only consistent female presence in the Music Hall scenes, has a non-speaking part but does accompany the men on the piano. However, it could also be argued that the Music Hall is one of the few areas of the social world in *Jeannie Once* where women are able to transcend gender boundaries. Mary O'Malley under the stage name of Maria Lachlan has been professionally successful in that world. George Lamont, her fellow performer, treats her as an equal throughout the play. The Music Hall too, like the Pantomime, is traditionally a form of theatre where gender differentials are acceptably flexible. As Maria Lachlan, Mary has been a male impersonator.⁹² However, the characters the Music Hall songs in the play celebrate whether sung by males or females are typical of the male dominated, patriarchal institution: "Champagne Charlie" from the saloon, the "gendarmes" from the police force, and the armed forces represented by the "Queen's Navee". In this world the stereotypical female "Little Polly Perkins" with her "hair hung in ringerlets", far from being able to marry a "wiscount" or "a nearl" as she wishes, instead has to compromise with "a bow-legged conductor of a tuppenny bus!" (JO 26). The fantasy

⁹² The Music Hall tradition had always included female performers, and some, such as Marie Lloyd, became very famous and popular. Among their number was always the female who made her name on the stage as a male impersonator, appearing in a tuxedo with a top hat and cane. Vesta Tilly was one of these, and it was she who made "Champagne Charlie", the song that Mary O'Malley sings, famous. Joanne Tompkins sees Renée's choice of the genre of the Music Hall as a vehicle of her feminist philosophy: "This boundary crossing that Mary's cross-dressed acting signals is part of the feminist agenda of the play" (246). In *O It Ain't All Honey and It Ain't All Jam* (1984), a script devised by Renée for two people and a pianist which traces the career of Gertrude Lawrence, Gertie also appears performing on the Music Hall stage as a male impersonator singing "Burlington Bertie," a song which, like "Champagne Charlie," was written to be performed by a woman wearing a tuxedo with a top hat and cane.

world of the Music Hall is portrayed by Renée, therefore, as essentially a reflection of the patriarchal social world and the joke is on the female who has had to compromise her aspirations.⁹³

The Music Hall numbers, despite their apparent joviality, remain essentially a public expression that is both superficial and devoid of any compassion. Thus in many ways the sentiments displayed on the Music Hall stage reflect the attitude of the patriarchy displayed in the text. In the “Gendarmes” number for example the policemen display, albeit in a satiric song, the double standard of Law and Order concerning males and females:

When danger looms we're never there!
 But when we meet a helpless woman
 Or little boys that do no harm
We run them in, we run them in, ...

If gentlemen will make a riot,
 And punch each other's heads at night,
 We're quite disposed to keep it quiet ... (51).

This song is sung as an ironic commentary on Martha's escape from the madhouse. Innocent and falsely accused, on Jeannie's imperative “Now Martha! Run” (50), Martha runs off the stage pursued by those who enforce the authority of the patriarchal system that controls the social world.⁹⁴

The counterpoint to the Music Hall songs is the musical theme of

⁹³ Joanne Tompkins has also commented on Renée's employment of the Music Hall as a reflection of her themes in this play:

each song mirrors the action of the moment: ... The irony, or at least the measure of the critical observation, engenders in the music-hall scenes the ability to comment on the action (245-6).

⁹⁴ Joanne Tompkins has also made the point: “as Martha tries to escape the Reverend Wishart's police posse, George Lamont and Barney sing a song about gendarmes ineffectively ‘running in’ innocent citizens” (246).

the play “O wert thou in the cauld blast” which is derived from a love poem by the poet Robert Burns. The ballad is a reflection of the nature of the female bond as Renée views it, and as such represents a contrast in values to those expressed on the Music Hall stage.

The singing of the musical theme as it passes between one woman and another becomes an expression of emotion and experience that is passed on by an oral tradition. This is in opposition to the representation of the patriarchy in the Music Hall songs which, although complete in themselves, remain generally unconnected with each other.

The musical theme is first sung in her home by Honoria at the beginning of Act One Scene Seven (37), where it follows immediately on from Barney’s audition for the Music Hall stage. Parts of two songs are thus juxtaposed in the script as representative of two different sets of values. Barney’s becomes a reflection of the tragedy in his own life as he sings, “I killed a man they said, so they said.” Barney accidentally killed his own mother. The punishment imposed by the patriarchal establishment for such a crime is then outlined: “I goes up Holburn [sic] Hill in a cart”⁹⁵ (36). Barney’s father was hanged when he confessed to the murder he had not committed in order to save his son’s life. The journey up Holborn Hill was part of the route from Newgate prison to the gallows at Tyburn.

The song sung by Honoria, immediately following Barney’s performance, reflects an alternative philosophy that advocates nurture rather than retribution.

⁹⁵ The words of the ballads are reprinted here and elsewhere in exactly the same format as they appear in the published script of the play.

O wert thou in the cauld blast
 on yonder lea, on yonder lea
 My plaidie to the angry airt
 I'd shelter thee
 I'd shelter thee (37).

Throughout the scene which opens with this lyric Honoria wrestles with the two opposing sets of values which have come to cause a central conflict in her life. She refers repeatedly to the blue dress, the symbol of her own, and the other women's, aspirations. At the same time she holds in her hand the Bible, the symbol of her husband's patriarchal values, which are condemning of those aspirations. She attempts to reconcile the two, by imagining herself singing the musical theme in a duet with her husband, as he was when she first knew him, when he courted her before their marriage. But the attempt fails. She stops mid-verse.

As a direct consequence of the conflict, in a state of emotional breakdown, she calls out to her children as she burns torn out leaves of her husband's Bible at the end of the scene. The thwarting of her aspirations has resulted ultimately, even in this gentle and inoffensive woman, in a act of rebellion against the limitations that have been imposed upon her by her husband's interpretation of a patriarchal system of values. Honoria's reaction reflects that of Iris, who, in wrenching the lid off Ben's coffin, is also rebelling against the limitation imposed on her by patriarchal values. Thus in the play set in 1879, stirrings of female rebellion are being identified both within the text and within the musical dimension of the drama. Honoria, like Martha, couches her protest in a challenge to the patriarchal interpretation of Christianity.

However, the power of the patriarchy at that time means that the aspirations of the women are doomed to be overwhelmed by this dominant force, and this is reflected also both in the text and in the music, where the Music Hall scenes dominate the musical dimension of the play.

Honorina sings the second verse of the ballad after signing the note that will facilitate Martha's escape from the madhouse.

Or did misfortune's bitter storms
around thee blaw, around thee blaw
thy shield should be my bosom
to share it 'a, to share it 'a (45)

Thus the musical theme underscores an act of rebellion, this time facilitated through a conspiracy to subvert the patriarchal establishment, which contains implicitly within the action the suggestion of an alternative interpretation of the true nature of Christianity that is being passed on through the female line. For although Alec assists in the escape plan, it is the women who plan and instigate it. The originally heterosexual love poem, in the context of this play, therefore becomes a distillation of the nature of the love bond between women.⁹⁶ Although in the first instance Honorina has let Martha down badly, she now remedies her own failings by giving Martha the "shelter" from the "bitter storms" of "misfortune" and metaphorically offering her own "bosom" as a "shield" to "share it 'a" by

⁹⁶ The last verse of the Robert Burns poem, which does not appear in the script, reads
Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae black and bare, sae black and bare,
The desert were a paradise,
If thou wert there, if thou wert there.
Or were I monarch o' the globe,
Wi' thee to reign, wi' thee to reign,
The brightest jewel in my crown
Wad be my queen, wad be my queen (Robertson 336).

signing the note that will allow Jeannie to visit Martha in the madhouse. Once again the women's nurturing of each other is associated with the image of the unfinished dress. "Dear Martha. She did so want me to have the blue dress" (45), Honoria says as she puts her signature to the request.

The play ends with Jeannie picking up again the first verse of the ballad and singing it to Margaret May in the madhouse just after Jeannie has voiced a compromising of her original aspirations. Thus on the one hand the musical dimension of the play is associated with the realisation, that in the climate of the time, the aspirations of the women are bound to be submerged, but on the other, it comes to assert that the female bond, and the values it represents, though unobtrusive, are ultimately indestructible. In all instances, the female theme is placed strategically in the plot to challenge the patriarchal definition of what constitutes "madness".

Significantly, it is this theme, representing as it does the nature of the female bond, with which Renée has chosen to conclude the play. Thus the playwright suggests musically perhaps, by implication, that the strength of the female bond may be reinforced through a continuum of experience that is passed on orally from one woman to another. The female theme is sung poetry rather than ditty, and as such, operates on a deeper emotional plane than that of the male world. In contrast to the bright lights of the Music Hall stage, it is sung without accompaniment in confined female spaces, and as such it represents a private rather than a public expression.

Thus, in *Jeannie Once* through the image of the unfinished dress, reinforced by differing musical forms, Renée compares and contrasts the effects of female and patriarchal valuing of women. The bondings between women, conducted in the confined spaces dominated by women, are transmuted into an expression of their nurturing of each other. Their symbol is the sky. Paradoxically, the effects of patriarchy on women, although they are conducted in the wide social landscape, are shown to be ultimately confining. Their images are associated with prison-like places such as the mental hospital where both Martha and Margaret May O'Connor are confined. The irreconcilable tension between the values of the working class women and the patriarchy meet in the image of the unfinished dress that is placed centre stage. It is begun, in the sense that it has created a bond between women that cannot be destroyed and that can be passed on through an oral tradition. It is unfinished because the male backlash perpetuated by the threat of such strong bonding between women can effectively frustrate both the personal and the social aspirations of the women concerned.⁹⁷ Contained within both the text and the musical dimension, however, is the suggestion that such frustration, even though it is effective in the short term, will ultimately result in the female rebelling against imposed confinements.

In *Wednesday to Come* Renée once again uses the technique of employing a working class musical genre to underscore her themes. In this play the bright lights, colour and vivacity of the Music Hall in *Jeannie*

⁹⁷ Joanne Tompkins has also recognised that two of the key themes in Renée's work are the cyclical nature of history and the failure of dreams (244).

Once have disappeared as entirely from the set as they have from the lives of the characters. It has been superseded instead by a drab interior and the “bluesy sound” of a single harmonica (*WTC* Author’s Note). The music and the set reflect the change in mood among working class people from an energetic and effervescent celebration of life, to one of lethargic melancholy.⁹⁸ The association of the music in *Wednesday to Come* with the American negro folk tradition mirrors the theme of deprivation of economic and social status that is conveyed by the image of the table.

In *Jeannie Once* despite a subtext that warned women of the dangers of the male in general whether acting as an individual or collectively, there was still some sense of the possibility of equality, companionship and sharing in the relations between men and women in some instances.

In *Wednesday to Come* the polarisation of the experience of men and women is reflected in the music, where the skill for playing the mouth organ is now the preserve of the male, which suggests by implication that the women no longer have any effective musical “voice.” Iris used to sing, but no longer does. Cliff has no recollection of his mother ever singing. When Iris recalls that she and Ben used to perform publicly as a duet, “We used to do items. He would play and I would sing,” Cliff is incredulous. Iris can only convince him by verifying the statement: “True. Ask your uncle” (*WTC* 16). Iris bought the mouth organ for Ben before Cliff was

⁹⁸ Lisa Warrington has outlined the reasons for Renée’s choice of music in the play, “Music is often a haunting statement; *Wednesday to Come* is enriched in performance by the plaintive sounds of Cliff’s harmonica, an instrument that, for Renée, epitomises the era of depression” (72).

born. "Thought he could do with a decent one, getting asked to concerts and all that." Ben was musical: "He could play all right" (16), and he has passed on something of his skill and his role to his son, Cliff. In this play therefore, the mouth organ is not only an instrument, but also a significant symbol which represents the skill and the privilege of artistic expression or "voice".

Significantly, it is only when Iris has taken aggressive action that she finds Ben's mouth organ. So the action of her finding, and then picking up, the instrument placed in his coffin becomes symbolic of her finding of her own "voice," or the skill and privilege of expression. In taking it out of Ben's hands into her own, and in having her "say" (38), she is able to articulate her view of life in the monologue which acts as the touchstone of the play. Holding the mouth organ, she not only reminisces, but comes to articulate the process which she believes is necessary for the survival of her people: the truth must be exposed, by force if necessary, just as she has wrenched the lid off the coffin and had to force herself to look at her dead husband's body with his "poor shoulders" that are "Rubbed raw" (37) from his harness. She recognises she had done Ben's fellow workers "an injustice" (38) in assuming they had taken his mouth organ, because it was missing from his belongings; but now she finds that they have placed it in his hands as a mark of affection. Hence not revealing the truth can itself lead to what Iris calls "an injustice" (38), a misunderstanding that would ultimately undermine solidarity. Next, someone must take responsibility for remembering accurately what has happened. Otherwise, as Iris asks, although "some" will recall spectacular

events like Ben's suicide, "Who'll remember us?" She already fears that the process of recording has been only partial because of this process, so that the true history of people like herself is being lost for good: "because it seems to me that everyone's forgotten about us. And even if they do remember it'll only be bits. We're the ones they leave out when they write up the books." The knowledge of what their lives were like must be passed on to future generations, and for that, as Iris says, "We need someone" (38). In taking the instrument from Ben's hands into her own, Iris herself not only becomes the agent for passing on working class memory through an oral tradition, since it is bound to be wholly or largely left out of any published record, but she also symbolically transfers the responsibility for that survival process from the tradition of the male to that of the female.⁹⁹

It is implied throughout the play, therefore, that the agency for the survival of an accurate history of the tribe is already in place in the female tradition, and that the responsibility for survival is safer in the hands of the females than of the males, because they in the end are the stronger, and have the greater will to survive. Unlike Granna, Mary or Iris, the males, including Ben in his coffin, have not developed the same stoicism and resilience in the face of adversity. Iris interprets Ted's tendency towards euphemism and sweeping things under the carpet as a form of cowardice that will, if it becomes cumulative, ultimately destroy any influence that

⁹⁹ A review of *Wednesday to Come* in 1984 printed a quotation from Renée which explained her view of the faulty recording process of the male view of historical events: "Men are good at forgetting or compiling highly selective accounts that become the only records" (Baxter and Tremewan).

the working classes may have in the future to change things. The attitude that “if you don’t say anything you can pretend it never happened” (32) will effectively prevent the formation of any oral folk memory. Ben, when faced with the harsh realities of the relief camp, has committed suicide. Iris views this, as she comments to Mary, as “the easy way out” (26). For Iris, and for Granna, Mary and Young Jeannie, the ultimate act of defiance is simply to go on living and to endure in spite of any adversity, while at the same time retaining a clear-sighted and informed vision. For, as Iris reprimands Ben in her monologue, “You see, what you don’t understand is that we all have harnesses. And most of us survive somehow. But not you – you couldn’t take it” (38).¹⁰⁰

The women may have had their economic and social status degraded so that they are confined to a position of powerlessness. The male may have been given all the “voice” in society at large at the expense of the female. Yet paradoxically, as Renée perceives it, it is the female, in the weaker position, who displays ultimately the strongest will both to survive and to exercise “voice”.

It is significant too, that within the musical element the dominant genre of the blues harmonica, held firmly in the hands of the male, is twice, if only briefly, disrupted by the female. In both instances the introduction of the female “voice” appears to be innocuous enough, but on

¹⁰⁰ Joanne Tompkins also sees the women in the trilogy as being portrayed as being stronger than the men:

Jeannie Once, like *Wednesday to Come* and *Pass It On*, figure working class women at the centre of the stage activity, both literally and figuratively: the plays centre on the women, making clear that it is they who accomplish their goals, who keep the family together and fed, and who tolerate the less effective men (246-7).

closer examination, proves to be a significant reflection of the thematic concerns of the playwright.

Iris, after Ben's coffin has been carried in and Ted has begun his meal of bread and jam, sings a song as an accompaniment to Cliff's fast rendition of "Bye Bye Blackbird." She is the one who has changed the rhythm. When "*From the sitting room they hear CLIFF playing something slow*" Iris calls out, "Come on boy, speed it up a bit. Your father liked it fast" (14). The gesture of Iris bursting into song could be seen as an hysterical reaction to the tragedy in her life. However, her reaction also illustrates the difference between the male and the female reactions to that tragedy. Cliff's lament is disrupted when Iris makes him "play faster and faster until by the end the timing is crazily fast" (14). So Iris challenges Cliff's propensity towards melancholic inactivity¹⁰¹ by a frenzied rendition of song. Almost immediately after this she makes up her mind to rebel against the situation that has been imposed on her: "What I...what I need is a hammer. Got a hammer Ted?" (14). The dominant musical element of the play, through the expression of the harmonica, in the hands of the male, and in the form of a lament, therefore represents not the female but the male "voice". The connotations of death associated with it become representative in different ways of each of the three male characters on the stage – Ted, who foregrounds the death of "voice", Ben, who has literally taken the option of death, and Cliff, the youngest of the three, whose

¹⁰¹ Renée has emphasised that she deliberately, in Cliff, created a character to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of males on the New Zealand stage: "I wanted to show a young boy who was emotionally affected in a way that is not generally shown on stage – a boy who wasn't able to keep a stiff upper lip, who had to jam the mouth organ in his mouth so that he wouldn't be crying all the time" (McCurdy 68).

energy throughout the action is consumed with the process of grieving for his father. The compulsion of the men is portrayed as being towards death in one form or another.

The women, on the other hand, from their position at the bottom of the social heap, struggle desperately for survival, and in the process find their defiance. For it is not only Iris that displays rebellion, as is illustrated both within the text and within the musical dimension of the plot. Early in the play there is another brief disruption of the dominant male “voice” when Granna begins “*singing quite independently of what CLIFF is playing*”

My mother said I never should

Play with the gypsies in the wood” (9).

The significant message of the lyric is that the “little girl” has not done as she has been told but has been “naughty” and has begun to “disobey.” Granna not only sings the song, but has already taught it to young Jeannie, who in turn sings the last line. Thus the musical element of the play reflects not only the inclination of the female to assume a proactive role independently of the male during times of adversity, but also a propensity towards rebellion which is being actively encouraged and passed down through the female line.

The mouth organ now becomes the symbol for how that survival may be achieved from one generation to another. Iris, having just “had [her] say ... *gives MARY the mouth organ*” (38). Mary then puts it on the kitchen table, where it is finally picked up and pocketed by young Jeannie.

The conflict over the ownership of the mouth organ becomes symbolic of the claim of the female to a fair share in the “voice” or expression in society. For Iris at first promises Ben’s mouth organ to Cliff not realising that Jeannie wants it, but Jeannie protests, “You shouldn’t let Cliff have Dad’s mouth organ when he’s got one of his own.” Iris concedes, “You’re right Jeannie,” and says, “I’ll get you one as soon as I can.” But Jeannie refuses a substitute, demanding, “I want that one” (28). She claims the right not only to a “voice” in society, but to have equal rights to her father’s “voice”. Thus Iris symbolically changes her attitude, and concedes that her daughter has a right to a “voice” as well as her son. Young Jeannie demands that her “voice” be on an equal status with those of her father and her brother, and so implicitly claims the right to return to the position in society that her great-grandmother, Jeannie, once had.

After taking it from Iris, “MARY *puts the hammer on the table near the mouth organ which IRIS has placed there*” (39). The symbols of the hammer and the mouth organ lying side by side assert that the “voice” of the working classes is not going to be heard unless they themselves adopt aggressive means, and that both the proactive role and the “voice” are now being passed on through the female line. For the play ends with young Jeannie’s action as she “*takes the mouth organ off the table, putting it in her pocket*” and saying “Right – I’m ready” (50). Thus Mary, through her small and seemingly insignificant action, has empowered young Jeannie to make the lost linkage in the continuum of female initiative which is being passed on through Jeannie, who is now Granna, to her daughter Mary, and grand-daughter Iris, and so through to young Jeannie.

Granna's Riddle: The Link with the Past and the Aspiration for the Future

The pivot of the continuous action that revolves around the kitchen, the female-dominated space in *Wednesday to Come*, is the presence of Granna, who was once Jeannie, the hopeful and resourceful protagonist of *Jeannie Once*, but who is now an old woman, sitting by the fire, and too infirm to participate in the household tasks that Mary and Iris are constantly busy with. Granna, writing in, or reading from, her notebook the seemingly unconnected scraps of dialogue that she picks out from what the others are saying, seems at first to be simply trying to devise a means of compensating for her increasing loss of memory. For Granna, after all, cannot easily remember even what day it is.

As the play progresses, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Granna, as the still point in the midst of all the household bustle, serves a much more complex function. Most of the phrases that she reads aloud from her notebook seem at first to be unconnected with the direction of the dialogue, but, on further reflection, they can be seen to provide an added dimension which throws the most significant details of the script into relief.

In this way Granna frequently becomes the agency by which Renée provides a commentary on the action at a deeper, more poetic level of understanding. As such, throughout the play, Granna acts as a kind of

choric figure, whose function is comparable to that of a Greek chorus.¹⁰² Much of the conversation in *Wednesday to Come* concerns the ordinary and the everyday. The voice of Granna as commentator highlights the significance of the seemingly trivial in relation to the whole. It is a sentence of Granna's which, for example, at the beginning of the play encapsulates the paradox which lies at its heart: "Sunday. In the midst of life we are in death. Iris did the washing" (*WTC* 8).

Granna's two simple sentences neatly juxtapose the opposing reactions to grim economic times, by contrasting a phrase from the Protestant funeral service, associated with the image of Ben's coffin, with the image of repetitive female drudgery, essential for the family's ongoing survival. By simple household tasks, such as these, Iris and Mary during the course of the play nurture not only their own family, but also play their part in nurturing the outside world as represented by the marchers. The ironing they are doing is a means, no matter how small, of adding to the meagre family income. While they are working, the communication between them, within their confined space, albeit sparse and restrained, proves to be the means by which they are also at work both in re-defining their roles in the light of Ben's death, and in passing on the collective female experience through the continuance of a shared oral tradition.

¹⁰² Rebecca Simpson, in a review of *Wednesday to Come* written in 1984, remarked upon the significance of Granna in the play: "*Wednesday to Come* is beautifully written. The language is spare but dense with meaning. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the device of Granna's notebook. It is both a commentary on what is happening and an insight" ("Suffering's Cyclical Nature" 36).

John Thomson in a review of *Wednesday to Come* also identified Granna's role in the play as a "chorus" (58).

Granna assumes from the beginning an increasing importance as commentator, but her functions are ultimately more complex than this. She also acts as comforter, as keeper of the history of the female experience for her class, and as seer, as is illustrated by the ceremony of the reading of the tea leaves.¹⁰³

The reading of the tea leaves appears at first to be a game played by Granna as a form of diversion acted out during times of stress. It has obviously been played out many times before, but in the play it takes place just after Cliff refers once again to the harness that has been discovered in his father's belongings, the object that has perpetrated the suicide which is the dominant tragic circumstance of the plot. Jeannie had been the one to pick the harness out of the carton that had held her father's few possessions. Part of the function of the tea reading ceremony is to take young Jeannie's mind off the painful revelations of the present, and, as such, Granna acts as comforter, bringing humour to the proceedings to diffuse the distress.

But central to the vision of what Granna sees in the tea leaves is "a dress, a wonderful dress" (34), and what gradually comes into focus is the fact, retrospectively constructed by the playwright, that the dress Granna is

¹⁰³ Other works feature strong and knowledgeable old women who also function as comforters and nurturers. *The Snowball Waltz* and *I Have To Go Home* (1997) both have protagonists who are grandmothers and who are also solo parents. In *Dreaming in Ponsonby*, Helen, who lives with her daughter and her son-in-law, is failing physically, but she is still an emotional support to the family. In *Willy Nilly* Alice is close to her granddaughter and it is she who buys Polly her wedding dress. Another Alice in *Dancing* owns the house in which the women go to live at the end of the play, and in *Belle's Place*, Belle, a woman of sixty, keeps an open house for her friends. In *Willy Nilly* Uncle Auntie is male but identifies himself as female. He is seventy one when the novel opens and it is he who nurtures Daisy and teaches her to find compassion for her mother. In both *Te Pouaka Karaehe* and *Touch of the Sun* the most powerful character is an old woman whose influence is still felt, even though she is dead.

describing is a recollection of Honoria's dress that she had made long ago, for it is "Deep blue. With ribbons on the sleeves and lace around the top and little pearl buttons down the front" (35). This corresponds to the dress for which Honoria had brought the materials in *Jeannie Once*, with its fifteen yards of deep blue taffeta, along with "twenty two pearl buttons, ten yards of satin ribbon and some lace" (*JO* 14). Even the words that Granna, as an old lady, uses to describe the dress of the tea leaves, "The blue of the sky when the stars are out" (*WTC* 34-35), are a semi-iteration of her own description of the colour of the taffeta for the unfinished dress when she was a young woman, "Such an amazing blue, sure and haven't I seen night skies like that, soft you know and the stars just coming out" (*JO* 14).

Thus what appears at first to be a game of diversion, played out in times of stress, proves in fact to be a ritualistic passing on of collective experience through the female line. For the first image that Granna picks out in her vision of the tea leaves is of young Jeannie standing in the middle of a crowd carrying a "bundle" (*WTC* 34). This echoes not only the possible image of Granna herself as a young immigrant woman carrying her store of meagre possessions off the ship, but also the phrase that Iris uses when she describes the "small bundle" that forms part of her dead husband's belongings (30). As soon as the "small bundle" is referred to in relation to Ben's belongings, Granna, in the next line intones "Large, small, pain is all" (30). When Granna was Jeannie in 1879 this phrase was passed on to her by Martha, the Maori servant girl, to sum up Martha's experience of life: "Large, small, pain is all. That is my world" (*JO* 40).

Thus Granna, as keeper of the oral tradition, passes it on through repeated images and phrases that have been woven into a female mythology of experience.

Although they are losing ground socially, personally and economically, the women endeavour to keep aspiration alive and to gather strength not only from the passing on of repeated images and phrases, but also through the passing on of names from one generation to another. Thus young Jeannie is named after Granna her great-grandmother, and Mary, Granna's daughter, after Granna's friend of the early days, Mary O'Malley.¹⁰⁴ Thus the whole female experience of life is shown to be cyclical.

Granna predicts in her vision of the tea leaves that young Jeannie's heritage, like her own, will be not only a "bundle" of a small stock of possessions, but also "a few tears" and "a little bit of money" (*WTC* 34). When Jeannie says she "[wants] to go too" (39) along with Cliff, who is going to join the hunger match, Granna recalls, "Jeannie went marching a long time ago" (39). Hence young Jeannie's future will be in some senses a repetition of Granna's past. As Granna comments earlier, there are strong parallels between their two identities, for, "I was Jeannie once"

¹⁰⁴ Renée has explained that it was her interest in tracing the legacy of the strong rebellious woman through the generations which led her to turn *Wednesday to Come* into a trilogy:

And I think *Jeannie Once* is a play that I came to because I wanted to find out more about her [Granna] when she was young...I knew why she called her daughter Mary, after a woman that she met on board ship coming out here, who was a woman that was very assertive and stood up to the captain and wanted better food and things like that, and I knew they wouldn't have lost touch immediately when they landed (Warrington 83).

(32). Thus the individual female life is shown to be part and parcel of the whole cyclical female continuum.

But Granna functions not only as comforter and keeper of the history of female experience for her class, but also as seer, when she compounds the image of the unfinished dress into the image of the dance. In her interpretation of the signs of the tea leaves Granna can be seen as predicting that the blue dress will be finished, and that Jeannie will wear it “at a dance and someone asks you to dance” (35). The dash ending the following speech implies that the one who asks will be a future partner. “May I have the pleasure? And you curtsey—“ (35). In the dash lies not only unfinished business, like the implied image of the unfinished dress in 1934, but also aspiration for the future, for what lies unspoken is the possibility of a romantic happy ending.

The image of the dance is to be found threaded throughout the text of *Jeannie Once*, where it comes to develop several different strands of connotation. As in Granna’s prediction of the tea leaves in *Wednesday to Come*, it is sometimes associated with the promise of finding a future partner. Alec does not know at the time that he is destined to be Jeannie’s future partner when he sings and dances with Nelly near the beginning of the play (*JO* 19).

Honoria, on the other hand, associates the image of the dance with memories of her family in Scotland before she emigrated:

I remember the day before we sailed and there was a picnic in the orchard and a bonfire of weeds and dead branches and there we were, your uncles and you mother, do you see us? All holding hands? And dancing! And there, watching us and smiling, is your grandmother! Oh mother! (39).

Thus the image of the dance becomes also associated with family bonding and happy times. In the play set in 1879 this image is sometimes associated with the link with the past, as is illustrated by Honoria's speech, and also in Jeannie's comment to Nelly: "We've travelled a long journey together. There's not been much opportunity for dancing!" (JO 19).

In the context of the present, the image of the dance carries with it connotations of defiance. Honoria calls out to her children, "Come my pretty ones, let us dance"(39), when she is burning her husband's Bible. Mary, cross-dressed as a male impersonator from the Music Hall stage, sings and dances "Champagne Charlie" to Nelly towards the end of the play. So the dance becomes associated also with the rebellion against traditional gender definitions.

However, in *Wednesday to Come* dance exists only as a verbal image in Granna's mythology and has passed entirely from the lives of the characters on the stage.

Granna's ritual of the tea leaves ends with a riddle:

Now, now, there's something in the bottom of the cup. Something that is lost will be found – in the midst of fear and pain – but as soon as you touch it you'll be safe. That's all. Wash the leaves away yourself, no-one must see them except you and me (WTC 35).

So Granna as commentator, comforter, keeper and seer, compounds the image of the unfinished dress with the image of the formal dance. In her vision, the dress, associated as it is with female aspiration, is finished and is somehow tied up with the concept of finding a partner. Granna never articulates the solution to the riddle she poses: one possibility, the mouth

organ, does not exhaust its possibilities. By implication she passes this on to young Jeannie as one of those strong women of the future, who appear destined to assume leadership positions, and whose task it will be to unravel the mystery of the riddle in their own lives.

Chapter Two: The 1950s to the 1980s

Young Jeannie, Sheila and Belle: The Debating Table.

Chapter Two will examine the view conveyed in Renée's dramatic works of the changing roles of women in New Zealand society from the 1950s to the 1980s. Most attention will be given to *Pass It On*, the third play in the *Wednesday to Come* trilogy, set in 1951, and to *Setting the Table*, set circa 1980, first performed in 1981. Some attention will also be given to *Belle's Place*, written in 1987, and as yet unperformed.

While some discussion will be given to the range of characters within these plays, as representatives of the times in which they are set, the greatest focus will again be placed upon the protagonists, as strong women who have each, in their different ways, assumed a leadership position: young Jeannie in *Pass It On*, Sheila in *Setting the Table*, and Belle in *Belle's Place*.

The aim of this chapter will be to further the identification of a pattern of images, themes and theatrical techniques that Renée has employed recurrently within her work, and to examine how these elements may have been developed and manipulated in order to convey her vision to her audience.

The Unfinished Dress

In *Pass It On* the remembered image of Nelly, the tailor's dummy, is now associated with a character, Nell, who is Jeannie's sister-in-law. She shares the same name and is associated with the same skill. At the opening of the play Nell appears "*sewing at an electric sewing machine. She is making a skirt for her daughter*" (PIO 9). Honoria, in her deranged state of mind, barely able to distinguish between people and objects, had exclaimed in *Jeannie Once*, after mistaking Nelly for a person, "She has no head!" (JO 55). Nell, Jeannie's sister-in-law in *Pass It On*, not only has a head, but she is learning how to use it. She and Jeannie are the central characters of the play. In the programme for the first production in 1986, the character of Nell was given top billing. Jeannie, who is so aware of, and so strong in, her political beliefs, is counterpointed by this Nell, who is only just becoming aware, as she watches what happens to characters such as Jeannie, of the wide political issues that surround the Waterside industrial dispute of 1951. As Nell develops from a passive acceptance of the status quo, and a preoccupation with her own family, to a growing realisation of the nature of the harsh realities of her world, she can be seen not only in name but also in psyche to be associated with the image of the unfinished dress, which could in turn be seen to represent in the work of Renée the gradual evolution of female aspiration through succeeding generations.

The audience, like Nell, are also probably in the process of having a few grim realities revealed to them, and in the play the character of Nell

makes a plea for women like herself, and probably many of the audience, who are only just beginning to identify the position they will eventually come to occupy:

What I was really scared of was what you said. I didn't want to hear those things out loud. Because then I might have to take some notice. But it wasn't all my fault. You and Cliff, and you too Gus, you seemed to have everything all sorted out. And you didn't seem to have much time for people who didn't. You take it for granted that all the things you've learned, well, everyone else has too. I think you forget that people like me are in the front line as well. We're the ones who have to face up to the grocer and the butcher (*PIO* 56-57).¹⁰⁵

Nell not only has a head but, by the end of the play, it is a discerning one. As she says to Jeannie, "I've been thinking," which, as Jeannie replies, can be a "Dangerous pastime" (56). Once she does begin to think, however, she soon perceives that the fulfilment of female aspiration must be concerned with more than just those organisational political issues that have come to consume Jeannie's life. It is then her turn to tell Jeannie, "There's a hell of a lot to do and it's not just in the unions or the Party" (57).

In the end, Nell, from this position of developing political self awareness, finds the confidence in herself to give advice to even those as strong as young Jeannie: "You're tired Jeannie, so have a rest. You're discouraged, so get your courage back" (57). In being given an equal status with hers towards the end of the play, the characterisation of Nell suggests that it is not only the politically active such as Jeannie, but those

¹⁰⁵ As Howard McNaughton has observed, "the son's wife's gradual awareness of the principles at stake serves as an accessibility device for the audience" (372).

who are beginning to think, who will be budding matriarchs, in direct line of descent from Granna who has gone before.

Renée has been seen to employ the technique of placing a central motif in her plays, which both translates physically on to the stage, and yet becomes the symbolic image around which the kernel of exploration of issues for that particular play can evolve. *Jeannie Once* centred around the image of the unfinished dress. *Wednesday to Come* displays a tension between two counter images, the life-surrendering attitude in the face of adversity of the male, represented by the coffin, and the life-promoting attitude of the female, represented by the kitchen table. *Pass It On* contains no such centrally placed symbolism. The episodic nature of the plot and the absence of a predominant image reflects perhaps the identity of the female in a state of flux and prone to redefinition as is Nell. As such *Pass It On* can be seen as a play which is representative of transitions which connect the experience of women in the late 1970s with their counterparts in the past.

Once again in *Pass It On* Renée asserts in the subtext that working class history has strong cyclical elements, but that the overall movement for the class in general, and for women in particular, at certain times in New Zealand history has been regressive, though the directional movement may not be immediately apparent from a cursory comparison of the three plays.

For example, the structure of *Jeannie Once* displays a balance between scenes set in female-dominated interiors such as Jeannie's workplace or Mary O'Malley's kitchen, and those set in male-controlled

or neutral external worlds such as the mental asylum and the Music Hall stage. This structure reflects the ability of the protagonist to move within both the female-dominated, and, albeit to a lesser extent, within the male-dominated locales of the society in which she lives.

Wednesday to Come, by contrast, depicts the females in the play as being effectively confined within the four walls of their female-dominated household interior, because of the effects of the degradation of their economic and social status. Young Jeannie, at the end of *Wednesday to Come*, defies the regressive shift in status of working class women in society, which has resulted in a sense of imprisonment and powerlessness, declaring, "Uncle Ted, we can't go on like this. I want to do something – I don't want to stay at home and just take whatever comes. And I'm not going to" (*WTC* 46). When Uncle Ted attempts to persuade her to accept the status quo with, "There's always been people who are not as well off as others. It's the way it's always been," Jeannie retaliates defiantly "Well, I'm going to change it. Or at least help to" (46).

At first glance it may appear that the rebellious intentions and social ambitions of the Jeannie of *Pass It On*, now a mature woman, have enabled her not only to come full circle in regaining the same degree of social mobility enjoyed by her ancestor in 1879, but to improve upon it. The episodic nature of the structure of *Pass It On*, made up as it is of twenty-nine short scenes, is a reflection of Jeannie's ability to move at will not only between the female-dominated interiors of her own home and her sister-in-law's, but also within the external world, to the Mayor's Office, the dance hall, the street, and the F.O.L. Special Conference. None of the

social interiors of *Pass It On* are barred to this Jeannie, as the saloon would have been to Jeannie Brannigan in 1879.

Also, she is politically active in a way that her great-grandmother never was, nor could have been. The Jeannie of 1951 is a fully paid up member of the Communist Party.¹⁰⁶ She is also on the Women's Committee of the Watersiders' Union. As such she is involved in the distribution of the bulletins which are printed to explain the case of the watersiders to the public at large. She is also involved in the organisation of one of the Relief Depots, which were set up by the Watersiders' Union to distribute necessities to the families of watersiders who were involved in the lock-out, and who were receiving no form of benefit during the time that they were not allowed to work.¹⁰⁷

Being so deeply embroiled in the dispute itself,¹⁰⁸ which aimed to

¹⁰⁶ The National government of the time was very hostile to members of the Communist Party as Keith Sinclair has explained:

It was a time of violent emotion...The wharf leaders were generally believed to be Communists...These were the days of the Korean War, of the Australian bill to ban the Communist Party, of Senator McCarthy. The Prime Minister said that the country was 'actually at war'; he said that there was a 'very determined effort...to overthrow orderly government by force'...The Minister of Labour, William Sullivan, said that it was not an industrial dispute but 'part of the cold war, engineered by Communists to advance their cause and the cause of Russia' (282-3).

¹⁰⁷ In a review in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1990 Renée explained how she had researched the play by interviewing women who had been involved in the lockout. She found them to have been very supportive of each other and engaged in the kind of activities we associate with Jeannie:

The women would get together at a meeting place and exchange stories and support, organise socials to keep people's spirits up, provide babysitters for one another, stretch the budgets to make sure their families had food, and hold off payment of bills for yet another week (Harris, "Women's Role").

¹⁰⁸ According to Keith Sinclair,

The unionists turned down the employers' offer and refused to work overtime. The employers placed the men on a two-day penalty. The men said it was a lock-out; the employers said it was a strike. The union refused to accept arbitration. The government was now able to make a stand on the principle of defending industrial law and order. Once again a state of emergency was proclaimed and some very severe emergency regulations were gazetted (282).

secure a fifteen per cent wage rise for watersiders, in order to bring them into line with the general wage offered to other groups of workers, when they had only been offered a nine per cent pay rise by the ship owners, is, in itself, an indication that the Jeannie of *Pass It On* is trying to act even more influentially to change the economic and social circumstances in which she finds herself, than her ancestor Jeannie Brannigan ever tried to do. All this has been made possible because the working class, by the 1950s, is now organised into political groupings such as the Communist Party and the trade unions, which claim to be committed to improving the lot of the workers they represent. In this sense the protagonist of *Pass It On* appears to be participating in an improved status in society which has come to be enjoyed by the working class as a whole, from which both men and women have benefited.

A closer examination of the three plays, however, reveals a counter argument to the initial impression of progress.¹⁰⁹ For the result of the Emergency Regulations, introduced by the government of the day in response to the watersiders' refusal to work more than a forty hour week unless they got the pay rise, means effectively that this group of workers

¹⁰⁹ W.B.Sutch has written about the lack of improvement in the lot of women in the decades of *Wednesday to Come* and *Pass It On*:

the women's rights movement achieved little between 1930 and 1960. Indeed there was a counter movement during this period. In these years a progression of achievement might have been expected to include the abolition of division of labour by sex, the equal distribution of surviving household tasks between men and women, public responsibility for child education and care, a single standard of sexual morality, the exploding of popular myths about the respective temperaments of the sexes and even, perhaps, a mitigation of male dominance...But this did not happen (43).

was no longer operating in a democratic State, having lost their right to freedom of movement, freedom of speech and freedom of other forms of expression of political opinion.¹¹⁰

For example, all the characters in *Jeannie Once*, including those at the bottom of the social ladder, such as Martha, took it for granted that they had the right to move around at will within New Zealand. At the end of *Jeannie Once* Martha leaves Dunedin altogether to begin a new life for herself on the Mahia peninsula. In *Pass It On*, due to the increased control of the State, permitted through the Emergency Regulations, watersiders have lost that right. The only reason that Marie is allowed to visit her sister in another town is because her husband is not a watersider and has no connection with their union. On her return she reports on the effects that the Emergency Regulations have had upon the workers that do belong to that union, whereby for them, “the town’s completely closed up, [and] you have to get permission from the police to come and go” (*PIO* 41). The regulations are even more draconian with respect to the union’s officials, who are, according to Marie’s report, “under house arrest” (41). Under the Emergency Regulations of the New Zealand of 1951, therefore, not only were certain sections of the work force not allowed to leave their own

¹¹⁰ Keith Sinclair records,

It was illegal to go on strike, to publish anything likely to encourage strikers, to give money to strikers or food to their wives and children. At the end of February the Waterside Workers’ Union was deregistered, that is, struck off the list of unions registered under the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act. The ‘wharfies’ now had no union and no leaders officially recognised (282).

town, but their democratically elected representatives were confined to their own homes when they had committed no crime.¹¹¹

There is little indication in *Jeannie Once* that anyone has been forbidden by the government from expressing an opinion in public, be it political or otherwise. The Music Hall is shown to be a major media outlet of the time, as well as a vital source of entertainment, and this was an important means of expression for the opinions of the working class. But, by contrast, by 1951, the major media outlets of this time, such as the radio and the newspapers, have been forbidden by the government to put the case of the watersiders to the public. In an early scene in *Pass It On* a newspaper editor is shown to be screwing up a piece of paper that explains their point of view, and throwing it into the rubbish tin, because, “it would be against the regulations to print it” (*PIO* 12). When Jeannie, in an attempt to overcome the muzzling of the voice of the watersiders that has been made effective by the media ban, tries to hire the town hall in order to hold a public meeting that will “put our case before the public,” she is refused by the Mayor for the same reason: “It’s against the regulations” (13).

Throughout the play it is made clear that the only means of expression left to the watersiders is in the form of “the Bulletin” which

¹¹¹ Keith Sinclair notes that the allegations made by the National government about the leaders of the watersiders’ union (see note 106) was in fact propaganda:

Many people blamed the disorder on Communists. And there were Communists among the leaders of some unions, including the waterside workers’ and carpenters’. At that time Communists were very antagonistic to the government. Clearly it was not serving the interests of Russian foreign policy – which seemed to be their chief interest. The best-known leaders of the watersiders, Harold (‘Jock’) Barnes and Toby Hill, were not Communists. They were able, aggressive, persistent, and they were very hostile to the government (274).

they printed themselves, the production of which has also been made illegal. Throughout the action the characters on the stage are hounded by the police in their attempts to produce and distribute these leaflets. This group of workers has, therefore, by 1951, effectively lost their right to freedom of speech through the media, in public places, or by their own individual device. When Cliff, Jeannie's brother, and a character who first appeared in *Wednesday to Come*, tries to set up an independent radio transmitter to overcome these restrictions, in order to broadcast his point of view, he is given six months hard labour for pursuing a course of action for which, if the State had been a genuine democracy, there could have been no serious charge.

Even in 1934 it never occurs to any of the four generations of women in *Wednesday to Come*, despite their own confinement and sense of powerlessness, that they do not have a perfect right to feed their fellow workers when they arrive at their door cold and hungry, just as similar sympathisers have done throughout the country during the progress of the march. During the course of the action in *Pass It On* it is made patently clear to the audience that such an expression of political sympathy has come to be regarded by the government as a crime. For, as the voice of the Minister of Labour announces over the radio, "anyone, I repeat anyone, who is found assisting watersiders, or their families, is guilty of breaking the regulations, and will be punished accordingly" (23).¹¹² Thus the

¹¹² As an article in the *Otago Daily Times* pointed out, anyone who helped, or was even suspected of helping, watersiders, under the Emergency Regulations faced a hundred dollar penalty, or three months hard labour, or both (Harris, L., "Women's Role").

actions of the Women's Committee, with which Jeannie is involved, in organising themselves to provide food for fellow workers, which is no more than a structured act of political sympathy with a similar intention to that displayed by the women of *Wednesday to Come*, in this political climate has become a punishable crime.

It is through comparisons such as these, implicit within the text of the trilogy, that Renée comes to assert her belief that the social and economic position of the working class in New Zealand, at certain grim times in history, has gone backwards.¹¹³ This assertion is underlined by the development of the imagery in the plays. The unfinished dress, the dominant stage prop in *Jeannie Once* has passed into mythology by 1934. In 1951 there is not even an articulation of that mythology, but only a passing reference to the means by which female aspiration has been nurtured in the past. At the beginning of the play Nell is first seen "*making a skirt for her daughter CHRISTINE. She finishes a side seam, cuts off the cotton and holds up the skirt*" (9). The suggestion within the text from the

¹¹³ Dick Scott, in his official history of the waterfront lockout, *151 Days*, points out that the measures introduced in response to the 1951 dispute are still on the statute books: "Some of the most vicious sections of the emergency regulations were written into permanent law" (205).

Union Matters, a series of three short plays written for schools during the time that Renée was Playwright in Residence at Theatre Corporate in 1986, is also concerned with the diminishing power of the union movement. The first play, set in Dunedin in 1888, shows unions being set up which are successful in improving the working conditions for their members. The second, set in a shearing shed, shows how a strong union can successfully defend the rights of the female workers within it. The third, set in a kiwi fruit factory, shows the wages and working conditions of the workers being systematically eroded by the employers, because an apathetic attitude on behalf of the workers towards their unions has rendered them powerless to defend the rights of the workers they were designed to represent. Thus Renée once again suggests, through the chronological sequence of these three plays, that the social and economic conditions for working class people may be regressive rather than progressive as time moves on.

Form (1993), a one act play written for young actors, is about the establishment of the first women's union in New Zealand in 1889.

beginning, through the manipulation of the imagery of the unfinished dress, is that female aspirations will not be fulfilled in this generation and that the only hope lies in the next. Towards the end of the play Jeannie is “*nearly in tears*” at the thought of visiting her brother in prison (56). So the threat of incarceration, even for those who have committed what would be no crime in a country which was a true democracy, is just as prevalent in the Auckland of 1951 as it was in the Dunedin of 1879. Solidarity is still being passed on through the female line. Nell’s children, Christine and Di, resolve to stand by their mum and accompany her when she visits their dad in prison.

Once again the cyclical nature of female experience is emphasised. The resolve of Nell’s children prompts Jeannie to remember her first march which she was so intent on joining at the end of *Wednesday to Come*. Like her great-grandmother she intones the same phraseology she used as a young girl: “When I was thirteen I was going to ‘bring the plight of the underprivileged to public notice’” (56). Thus, through a close comparison of the texts of this trilogy, it becomes clear that her aspirations have been even more cruelly dashed than had those of her namesake.

It is in the light of the realisation of the futility of her aspiration that Jeannie refers to Granna, who had gone marching before her, for the first and only time in the play: “Going to read my tea-leaves, Gus? That’s what Granna did to cheer me up” (56). There is still the merest flicker of remembrance of their means of passing on the female myth, for young Christine knows that “Aileen’s mother reads tea leaves” (56). But even the

mythology is never articulated in the final play of the trilogy. The unfinished dress is further from completion than it ever was.

In *Belle's Place*, set in the early 1980s, the image of the dress is also identified as a symbol of frustrated female aspiration. One of the central characters, Cary, is transsexual. He makes a striking entrance at the beginning of the play wearing a yellow dress. Another central character, Dietrich, comments sardonically, "I think it suits you. Especially the colour" (*Belle's Place* 9), and indeed Cary could be accused of being a coward. For most of his current daily life he dresses conventionally and hides his sexual preference behind the guise of having a traditional nuclear family.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that the dress is translated on to the stage in this play in a different colour and on a very different kind of "female", and despite the fact that it can be argued that Cary is not strong like Renée's female characters, because he lacks the courage to fly in the face of social convention as they have often been seen to do, the yellow dress in *Belle's Place* is still in direct line of descent of the image of the blue dress. It is still an image of frustrated aspiration among those who identify themselves as female. For the yellow dress is not only representative of Cary's so-called "cowardice". It is also the representation of his frustration at being not being able to live out his desired life-style openly. Even so, the implication contained within the image is no longer negative in terms of progress as it has been in the trilogy. Unlike the blue dress of the other plays, it is at least finished, and is no longer merely a myth with a promise, like the one woven into Granna's riddle. In *Belle's*

Place, the finished dress appears both as a concrete and a figurative image. Through this image, therefore, Renée suggests that some progress has been made by the mid 1980s. Cary can at least wear it and fulfil the aspiration of his desired life-style, albeit only for one day a week and within an enclosed community, unlike the women of previous decades who have had to live lives of compromise, never being able to fulfil their dreams.

The Table

As Renée perceives it, the role of women in New Zealand society took on a significantly new direction in the 1970s and 80s. *Setting the Table*, her first play, was written in 1981. The changes that were taking place in Renée's lifestyle at the time, with her increasing involvement with the feminist movement in Auckland, and with the Broadsheet Collective, were to form the raw material that was the inspiration for the play.

Setting the Table is not specifically dated as are the plays in the trilogy. However, reference is made in the text to "Maxwell's Silver Hammer," a song first recorded by the Beatles in 1969, so the play could not be set before that date. Sandi Hall, in an article in *Broadsheet* entitled "A Different Ten Years" published in July/August 1982, refers to the first Women's Refuge being set up by Joanne Crowley in Christchurch in 1975 (Hall, "A Different Ten" 94). This play is set in Auckland. The rehearsals in it are for the kind of women's movement events that were prominent in

the city in the late 1970s. Indications within the text, therefore, date *Setting the Table* to the latter part of the decade, or, at the very latest, to 1980 or 1981.

Pass It On in many ways is representative of a transitional phase in the changing role of women in New Zealand society, which links the women of the past with their counterparts in the late 1970s. Renée's manipulation of the image of the table illustrates this. The table in Nell's kitchen has the traditional functions of the tables in both *Jeannie Once* and *Wednesday to Come*: it is both a worksurface and the focal point of family meals. However, the table changes its function in the penultimate scene of the play when around it Nell, with her sister-in-law Jeannie, her brother-in-law Gus, and her children Di and Christine, begin to discuss their differences. As such the table becomes a facilitator for debate, a focus by which the members of a previously divided extended family can express their individual points of view and come to some understanding of each other.

By the late 1970s in *Setting the Table*, the table which forms the central image of the stage set functions primarily as a facilitator of debate. The main difference is that the discussion around this particular table is socially much more extreme. The women seated around it challenge not only the traditional function of the table, but also the traditional concept of the family itself. The function of the table in the previous plays that have been discussed has been almost entirely displaced by the function of debate about how best to conduct a new variety of lifestyle of social activism.

Unlike the women in the trilogy, these women are permanently employed in jobs in which they exercise the skills in which they have been trained. Sheila is a nurse, Abby a teacher, Con a pay clerk and Rose a potter. They are all acutely aware of the political situation in which they find themselves. They have all rebelled against the tradition within which the table serves as the functional centre for a family. On the contrary, they have each chosen not to be part of a traditional nuclear family at all, and have instead formed a separatist household, redefining the concept of "family" in terms of a unit that is exclusively female and no longer bonded together by the traditional ties of marriage or blood kin. It is clear that the four female characters which Renée places centre stage in this play have a very different attitude from their counterparts in the trilogy, who were all prepared to mix with men in a heterosexual environment. To the women in *Setting the Table*, the male sex, both individually and collectively, has come to be regarded as their enemy.

However, despite this variance with the attitudes of the other women in her plays, closer examination reveals that Renée remains highly ambivalent in her attitude towards the institution of marriage throughout the whole of her work. In *Jeannie Once* all of the female characters but one are shown to be involved in marriage at some stage in their lives, but the foregrounded marriage, that between Honoria and the Reverend Wishart, is placed centre stage only at the point where the tension within it is so great that it drives Honoria to the point of breakdown. Of the other three central characters, Martha never mentions marriage, and Mary O'Malley appears to resist George Lamont's proposal to return with him

to the Music Hall stage.¹¹⁴ Mary has never married herself and has lived for many years as a quasi-solo parent. George's language in her company, and his statement, "You're living half a life, my darling" (*JO* 47), suggests that he has an emotional as well as a professional attachment to her. Her reaction to this when she states, "You have to accept this time I know better!" is a rejection not only of a return to her former professional life, but to any further emotional involvement with him (47).¹¹⁵

Jeannie, the protagonist, is about to get married to Alec as the play closes. We never know whether the marriage will be successful or not, as it is never again referred to in the rest of the trilogy. What we do know, however, is that Jeannie's attitude towards Alec is ambivalent. At the beginning of the play she tells him twice very firmly that she has no intention of ever marrying again. Barney also warns Alec that Jeannie is of this opinion. Although Jeannie declares to Mary at the end of the play, "I love the big lump!" (58), what is made patently clear in the text is that her bonding with Alec has been cemented because he has helped Martha to escape the madhouse. Jeannie herself says this to Alec, who is at that stage still incredulous at the change in her attitude, when she explains, "I knew as soon as you agreed to help get Martha away. I knew then I'd have you"

¹¹⁴ Joanne Tompkins has also noticed Renée's negative portrayal of marriage in *Jeannie Once*: "virtually all the marriages in the play are dreary, exploitative, and unhappy affairs" (248).

¹¹⁵ However, it could also be argued that, despite her protestations, a question mark still remains about Mary's final decision on this matter. In the penultimate scene of the play she performs once again on the Music Hall stage as Maria Lachlan. In the previous scene, dressed as "Champagne Charlie" she confides to Nelly, "I find myself wanting to go back" (*JO* 54). Presumably this means that she is at least considering a return to her old lifestyle. Also, Jeannie mentions to Margaret May at the end of the play "Mary had the notion that we [she and Alec] might take over the boarding house" (*Jeannie Once* 61). The final Music Hall number in the play is all about marriage between Mary's and George Lamont's character.

(57). In other words it is the bonding between the females that has facilitated the marital bond. At the end of the play Jeannie's prediction for her future is equally equivocal when she exclaims to Margaret May O'Connor, "Oh we will be content. I know we will. It is not what we dreamed of but maybe we just need to find another dream" (61). The speech suggests resignation and compromise rather than fulfilment of aspiration. It is certainly true that Jeannie's marriage to Alec puts an effective end to her professional and social aspirations.¹¹⁶ During an altercation with Jeannie in scene three of Act One Alec himself suggests that perhaps Jeannie did not enjoy the experience of marriage: "Tried it once and didn't like it eh?" (22). The scene ends with Jeannie's rhetorical question to Nelly, the tailor's dummy, significantly, perhaps, the symbol of her professional aspiration: "What do you think Nelly? Is it because I

¹¹⁶ Joanne Tompkins has also remarked that Renee's subtext in this play probably questions the traditional assumption that the solution of marriage brings happiness to the female:

The apparently happy-ever-after reconciliation that marriage so often represents in the theatre is challenged, since marriage is proven to represent settling for something less than ideal. Jeannie accepts the inevitability of marriage as a means to a secure – if humble – job with the wealthy Larnach family: her agreeing to marry Alec signifies a conscious economic union more than a great passion (248).

Although it is not referred to in the text of the play, there is an implicit irony in Jeannie's sense of forced gaiety in this speech. In fact, 1879 was the year in which William Larnach decided to keep five of his children in England to complete their education. Only the baby was left in New Zealand (Sneddon 128). So Jeannie's job would not have the possibilities, even in the limited capacity of "darning and mending", that she would have hoped for. Alec may have heard from Walter Riddell that Mrs Larnach wanted to employ a married couple with a seamstress wife (*JO* 33). What he did not know was that Eliza Jane, first wife of William Larnach, would be dead by 8 November 1880 (Sneddon 139). So Jeannie could have ended up marrying Alec in the hope of a job which in the end offered only impermanent employment.

It could be argued that Jeannie's final speech in the play is ambiguous. Renée's views on the female having to compromise her dreams, however, are not:

I think it's so awful that you can't have the dream you want. It's really something that all of us have to come to terms with. And I feel like we should rage about it, and say why the fuck can't we have that dream, that was the one I wanted (Warrington 82).

tried it once and didn't like it?" (24). It is a question left hanging above the subject of Jeannie and marriage.

In *Wednesday to Come*, all of the adult women have been married at some time in their lives. The marriage that is foregrounded here is the one between Iris and Ben, and there are signs of a strong bond between them. In her monologue to Ben as he lies in his coffin, Iris speaks at times affectionately to his dead body, and says she is going to miss him. Yet a significant aspect of the marriage which is emphasised on the stage is Ben's betrayal of Iris. His mistress, Molly, is one of only two members of the community from outside the family who are introduced into the play.¹¹⁷ There are signs that Mary has had a satisfactory marriage, but this is only mentioned in passing.

Betrayal of the wife by the husband is an aspect of married life that Renée has emphasised in other works. In *Belle's Place*, Belle's sister Laura has found her husband in bed with her best friend. In *Does This Make Sense To You?*, Flora already knows, when the novel opens, that her husband is having an affair with another woman. In *Daisy and Lily* Daisy's husband runs away with, and eventually marries, Olivia, whom Daisy had taken into her home and reared as one of her own family.

In *Pass It On* Nell and Cliff appear to have a happy marriage, despite the stresses brought about by the political climate of the time, but in response to that climate there are indications that the marriage of

¹¹⁷ As Howard McNaughton remarks, "the appearance of the dead man's mistress is a powerful device to undermine any sentimental reaffirmation of emotional and material dependence" (372).

Jeannie and Gus is under increasing strain, and Renée has said in an interview that she would not have anticipated that the marriage would have lasted for more than five years after the end of the play (Beatson 34). What all this boils down to is that although marriage is an almost universal condition for women of marriageable age in the trilogy, Renée has usually chosen to portray in detail only those which display strong elements of tension between the male and the female.

In *Setting the Table*, therefore, the traditional function of the table which is to be found in plays with earlier chronological settings is displaced, and it becomes a table around which debate rages. The change in the function of the image of the table reflects a revolution in the roles of women in society as Renée perceives it to be in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

By the early 1980s groups of women such as these, who are attempting to overthrow the old order, have at least de-centred it to some degree, so seated around this table is a group of very different women. They are all educated, articulate, politically astute and permanently employed. The growing proportion of such women on the set reflects the expansion in their roles in society. The main motivation of these women is not to feed and provide for a family, but to try to change the nature of the society in which they live, by means "political" or not, or even lawful or not.

Some of the women in the plays dealing with earlier eras had shown an inclination to split emotionally from the male, but still remained within the confines of a domestic tradition. Because of their new-found financial

independence, these women by the early 1980s do not have to be dependent on any man unless they choose to be so, and they have a greater freedom to choose a lifestyle to suit themselves.

Renée interprets this freedom as having both positive and negative consequences. It energises the women, prompting them to try to find new solutions to traditional problems. The decision of Connie and Assy to give up all their spare time for a year to help the battered wives and children at the Haven may be viewed on the one hand as a gesture of compassion and self-sacrifice. But on the other hand, it is also a gesture of criticism of the patriarchal system, which chooses to turn a blind eye to the suffering of females who have been abused by their husbands. This produces an equally mixed reaction on behalf of other sectors of society. Rather than being appreciative of the volunteer work of some of the women, a cross-section of the males sense the implicit criticism and cannot cope with it. Some, especially those who are guilty of abusing their women, register their inability to face up to what they have done by resorting to violence against those who have tried to help their victims. Renée, in this play, is not concerned with presenting solutions to all of the many and complex issues which make up aspects of the debate for which the text of the play is largely a vehicle. She does, however, strongly suggest that the attitude of sweeping the issue of domestic violence under the carpet is no longer acceptable. She also suggests that because of a refusal to confront the issue of male abuse of the female, it may be that by the early 1980s only a radical act of violence, such as Sheila's attack on the accused rapist, will shock society out of its complacent attitude and force it to look at the

various aspects of the problem. Could it be that the only way to prevent violence is to respond with counter-violence? In keeping with the central theatrical image of the play, the debating table, she presents the position of these women in New Zealand society at this time to be at the centre of a hotbed of political debate. The symbol of the activist women in *Setting the Table* is the camellia badge which was given to all women who attended the most recent Women's Convention. On the back of that badge these particular women have scratched their own emblem, an image of a table. By this means, these women re-define the meaning of the image of the table and claim it as a symbol for their own feminist separatist cell. In a similar development Renée, as time moves on chronologically in her plays, directs her attention more exclusively towards this kind of shift. She has always been interested in gynosocial groupings. In her settings from the 1980s onwards, her protagonists link with others from homosocial groupings with strong homosexual tendencies.

This trend is made apparent in *Belle's Place*, set in "late Spring, 1985" (BP 1). In this work the homosocial female grouping is dominant. This time the sexual orientation of all the roles is made quite clear, and five of the six characters are homosexual. Renée has made it a distinctive feature of her oeuvre that in her work set in the 1970s onwards, she frequently includes lesbian characters. *Setting the Table*, *Groundwork*, *Belle's Place*, *Born to Clean*, *Willy Nilly*, *Missionary Position*, *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood*, *Daisy and Lily*, and "Rarely Pure and Never Simple" (1995), all have protagonists who are lesbian. In *Breaking Out*, *Heroines*, *Hussies and High High Flyers*, *Does This Make Sense To You?* and *The*

Snowball Waltz other characters are. Though many, notably in *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood*, experience prejudice and retaliation as a consequence of their sexual preference, others, notably in work set in the 1990s, achieve acceptance. In this way Renée has made it part of her writing philosophy to bring the subject of homosexuality out into the open in New Zealand literature and to attempt to enlist an acceptance of it in her audience (Renée, personal interview 19 August 1998).

Renée suggests in her work set in the 1970s and early 80s that in this era the separatist household was still in the process of development. In *Setting the Table*, the central characters all occupy the same household, but their sexual preference is still a matter for discreteness, both within the text, and for such people in society at large.¹¹⁸ This is an indication of the climate of the time, for when the play was first performed in the early 1980s, the portrayal of homosexuality was embarrassing to many New Zealand audiences, and homosexuality within society was a matter for secrecy.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Mervyn Thompson records Renée's attitude towards the sexual dimension of the play when he first workshopped it,

During rehearsals I tried to draw her out on the sexual lives of her characters, but she would not answer. Their sexuality is not an issue, she said. If, for example, she were to present some of her characters as lesbians then that would allow prejudiced members of the audience to 'explain away' *political* actions as *sexual* ones. No-one, she insisted, was to be permitted to wriggle off the hook of the play's meaning; the sexual dimension of the characters was therefore to remain unexplored ("Another Life" 117).

¹¹⁹ Renée made it clear in an interview with Lisa Warrington that she had no doubt in her mind about the sexual orientation of her central characters when she wrote the play: "The fact that the women in *Setting the Table* were lesbians wasn't to me of as much importance as the debate [about domestic violence] at that time" (76). An article in *Broadsheet* in 1990 noted that lesbians were involved in refuge centres all over the country in the early days (Rosier, "A Place To Go" 19). Renée found herself pressured by Mervyn Thompson when the play was first workshopped. "He kept wanting them to do something lesbian," she said, "He kept on at me about it". She, on the other hand, was of the opinion that an explicit expression of sexuality would detract attention from the theme

In focusing the action of the play around a group of women living together in the same household, Renée suggests discreetly that the path to self-fulfilment for some may lie in the formation of non-traditional households. Another of Renée's plays, *Dancing*, written in 1984 but set in 1980, examines a similar concept. The central female characters decide upon a similar solution, and the play ends with them looking forward to setting up house together. But in 1980 the whole concept is still described by them as "a fairy tale" (*Dancing* 30), in the sense that contained within it is the promise of the traditional ending of living "happily ever after." This foregrounds Sheila's reference to the fairy tale myth in *Setting the Table*, "So even my fairy tales don't have a happy ending? I mean to hell with the handsome prince et cetera but never to win – ever?" (*Setting the Table* 48). Thus fairy tale mythology, traditionally a heterosexual domain, in the work of Renee is being re-crafted to suit a gynosomal context.

In *Belle's Place* the aspiration for the fairy tale happy ending for the separatist homosexual sector of society has been partially realised. Belle, the protagonist, has not compromised her sexual preference or given in to society's expectations. She is now sixty and remains unmarried. Belle also lives in her own house. Her house is owned jointly with her sister, who lives well away from Belle in Timaru. Unbeknown to her sister, Belle has set up a network of contacts for gay people all over New Zealand so that they can use her house as a safe haven to take time out to be themselves when they need it. Belle is in many ways acting as an unofficial charity.

of domestic violence which she saw as the central issue in the play (Renée, personal interview 12 December 1997).

Her guests only pay if they can afford it, and those that can do so leave a donation, out of which Belle takes only her living expenses. Any surplus money she saves in preserving jars which she buries in the garden, in the hope of one day having enough money to buy out her sister's share of the house. So, in *Belle's Place*, one sector of the community's fairy tales may come true, if only for a short time each year, or on a Sunday when she invites some of her friends over and cooks them midday dinner.

"Belle's Place" is very well patronised. One of the characters, Rita, is staying there for her annual holiday. Belle has had two other guests the week before, and has one arriving next week, which by her standards means being "quiet this month" (*BP* 12). The need that so many of Belle's guests have to use the house is some indication of the extent of the prejudice against the gay community in New Zealand persisting in the mid 1980s.

At the time when the play is set, male homosexuality was still a crime, although lesbianism had never been criminalised because of an idiosyncrasy in Victorian English law. The Homosexual Law Reform Bill had been introduced and was a matter for heated debate. Those in favour of reform sent a petition around the country urging New Zealanders to sign it in order to persuade the government to pass the Bill into law, but there were still those in society of the kind Dietrich refers to in the play as "those people [who] think we should be exterminated" (*BP* 6). Renée takes care, however, throughout the text of this play, to portray the gay community as being made up of people who have everyday habits, and who, like the rest of New Zealand society, enjoy its traditions, such as

having a roast and gravy in a relaxed family atmosphere on a Sunday. The subtext of the play, therefore, as with the rest of Renée's works, is couched in the form of a plea for understanding and compassion for the characters whom she places centre stage, even though they may have been created to illustrate aspects of New Zealand society that have traditionally been kept secret.

The four female characters placed centre stage are Belle and her sister Laura, along with Rita and her former lover Dietrich. In this play, however, the other gay couple, Cary and Duke, are more fully fleshed out and given more sympathetic characteristics than are many of the other male roles that Renée has created. Cary, in particular, is given prominence, and attracts immediate attention by making a striking entrance in his yellow dress at the beginning of the play. The costuming is, nevertheless, but one of a number of theatrical devices in this play which place it firmly in the arena of taboo subject matter for New Zealand writers of the time.

The balancing between the two pairs of lovers, one set male, Cary and Duke, and the other female, Rita and Dietrich, is unusual in the work of Renée, whose intent is more often to enlist the sympathy of the audience for the female characters only. It indicates her desire to create an understanding in her public for the gay community as a whole, along with all its related issues.

Yet despite this attempt at redress, it is still the female characters who are given the prominent voice. They tell their stories in the greatest detail, related in the genre of the fairy tale. For example Dietrich begins

her account: "There was once a young girl...One day she went to visit her grandmother" (*BP* 52). As often to be found in the work of Renée, these women have all experienced some extreme form of individual or collective male abuse. Dietrich has been raped, Laura betrayed by her husband, Rita put in a children's home by her mother's lovers, and Belle committed to a mental asylum by her father because he found her holding her girlfriend's hand. Dietrich's account continues, "On her arm she carried a basket with some fish and chips...the young girl had to pass through a park...she was grabbed from behind...after they'd finished they ate the grandmother's fish and chips" (53). Thus the modernised version of the fairy tale forms a bitterly ironic counterpoint to the versions of the fairy tale aspired to by Sheila and by the women in *Dancing*.

In this work, the propensity of the male for barbaric retaliation against female aspirations differs from those forms of it that have been discussed so far, in that the form of female aspiration placed centre stage here is predominantly homosexual, and that the backlash of punishment for aberration from the perceived sexual norm results in punishment from female as well as from male power wielders. For it is Belle's sister Laura, as well as her father, who had connived to have her incarcerated in the mental asylum and given electric shock treatment in order to "cure" her of her "illness."

It is acts of repression such as these, Renée suggests, which have caused the extensive damage to relationships within families in these situations, such as Belle's, and which have resulted in the heterosexual and the homosexual communities in New Zealand becoming so

profoundly divided from each other. This is conveyed theatrically when Belle takes a rope and divides the stage area into two distinct halves, one for her straight sister, and the other for herself and her friends.

A table, which has appeared as a consistent image throughout Renée's work, appears again in this play, but this time it is placed firmly on Belle's side of the stage. It exists once again both as a physical image and as a metaphor. Once again it is one of the means by which a living is earned and the family is nurtured. Belle makes a living by feeding her guests at the table. In this play as on other Sundays she prepares a meal for the "family" unit, all of whom are of the same sexual inclination as herself. Throughout the process of serving the Sunday roast on her half of the stage Belle determinedly refuses to share any of the meal with her sister, sitting on the other side of the stage and divided from those around Belle's table by the rope that is the symbol of schism. The re-definition of the table that began in *Setting the Table* is thus given a much more open emphasis in this play. Belle's table is designed to nurture and financially support only those of the re-defined family unit of the homosexual separatist community. At the start of the meal, as far as Belle is concerned, those that represent the majority power structure, like her sister, have excluded her kind in other contexts, and so in their turn deserve to be excluded within her "Place."

Nonetheless, Belle's table functions, as before, as a facilitator of debate, and not all of Belle's chosen "family" are comfortable with her symbolic gesture. The embarrassment of some, and the pleading of others, for her to share the meal with her sister, and Belle's own softening attitude

as the meal progresses, is itself symbolic of the debate that was taking place within the homosexual community of the time about whether or not to take a determinedly separatist stance.

The Hammer

When young Jeannie walks out of her home at the end of *Wednesday to Come* with the statement, “Right – I’m ready,” the female aspiration is symbolised by the mouth organ which she puts into her pocket (*WTC* 50). The words may be interpreted to imply that the passing on of the working class female oral tradition has adequately prepared young Jeannie as the representative of her class in the next generation. The gesture might be interpreted as suggesting that the achievement of the collective female aspiration is within reach.

Viewed in this light the final image of *Pass It On* and of the trilogy as a whole, of the same Jeannie who was young once, now staggering across the stage from the shock of seeing the marchers being pushed back by the use of a policeman’s baton, becomes deeply ironic. The baton wielding policeman becomes the physical translation of the metaphor of the “man...with a hammer” of *Jeannie Once* (*JO* 57).¹²⁰ He is the

¹²⁰ Lisa Warrington has observed that in Renée’s work the male characters are secondary, and can often be classified into two categories, stereotypes who are authority figures, which she describes as “cardboard cut outs of antagonistic behaviour” and “Simple honest working men” (71). The policeman who invades the stage at the end of *Pass It On* wielding his baton against the marchers is a good example of the former category, and Ted in *Wednesday to Come* is a good example of the latter.

anonymous representation of a masculine authority, who attacks the working class people without reason, warning, or justification.¹²¹

Through the manipulation of this image, therefore, the hope that Renée has kindled by the endings of *Jeannie Once* and *Wednesday to Come* is effectively doused at the end of the trilogy. The hope that Jeannie Brannigan expressed about the nature of the new order of society being founded in New Zealand has been proven to be unfounded. In the end the man with the hammer has won again. The metaphor has proven to be just as relevant to New Zealand as it ever was to the country of her birth. The New Zealand of 1951 is shown to be even more representative of that metaphor than was the Dunedin of 1879, and the hammer remains just as firmly in male hands as it always was.

Renée underlines her opinion in this play by the employment of the theatrical device of the recorded voice, representing the Government of the day, that speaks to the characters on stage intermittently throughout the action. The depersonalised manner in which the voice expresses itself, and the disembodied nature of the voice itself, give the impression to the audience that the State has become both detached from, and indifferent to, the distress of the human beings that are portrayed on stage. The voice is always male, always authoritarian, and always threatening to the civil liberties of the working class men and women with whom the audience is in the process of developing a bond of sympathy and understanding.

¹²¹ There is a recurrence of the image of the police attacking peaceful protesters in *Groundwork*, relating to the 1981 Springbok Tour “—the batons covered in blood – the ribs broken” (*Groundwork* 42). The same protest is recalled in *Daisy and Lily* where “a man was batoned to the ground” (*Daisy and Lily* 163).

As a dramatic device, accordingly, the recorded broadcast authoritarian male voice throughout the play is equivalent in function to the threatening individual masculine off-stage presence of Wishart in *Jeannie Once* and the collective off-stage presence of the authorities and their forces of enforcement in *Wednesday to Come*. As before the audience can develop no sympathy with a presence that has no individual human face. It represents instead both the individual and the collective male threat, that is made even more potent because it exists primarily in the imagination of the audience. By this device, Renée asserts that the New Zealand of 1951, which calls itself a democracy, has, in fact, become a male dictatorship.

This threat becomes even more engulfing when the individual authoritarian voice is extended to include other compliant subsidiary characters such as the Editor reading from an article he has written, which concurs with the stance of the Government, and the F.O.L. President, speaking to a gathering of workers. The women in *Wednesday to Come* may have been caged in their individual household because of a degraded economic and social position, but in *Pass It On* the sense of claustrophobia becomes even more extended, as the audience comes to realise, through the identical nature of their deliveries, that not only the Prime Minister and the Minister of Labour, but the voice of the media, and even the representatives of the workers themselves,¹²² have come to be

¹²² *The Oxford History of New Zealand* records that during the dispute "The FOL under its Vice-President, F.P. Walsh, made some attempts to secure conciliation and arbitration but, when these were rebuffed, turned to help the Government against its competitor the T.U.C." (Oliver 358).

Keith Sinclair explains,

agents of an aggressive male dictatorship which is intent on robbing the watersiders of their democratic rights. When Cliff seeks to broadcast an alternative voice, for example, he is quickly arrested and sentenced to six months imprisonment. In *Pass It On*, therefore, the whole of New Zealand has become a cage for the working class characters who are trapped within it on the stage.

In *Jeannie Once* and in *Wednesday to Come* the individual and collective male threat remains not only off stage but silent. In *Pass It On* Renée employs a similar theatrical device, but increases the sense of entrapment by giving that threat a voice. The domineering nature of the recorded voice that intrudes at will by means of radio into the privacy of the household interiors in this play is one of the means by which Renée underlines her opinion that New Zealand was becoming at that time a progressively less democratic state.

So the increasing and deepening sense of danger that is reflected dramatically through the trilogy by the metaphor of threat in the form of the off-stage male presence, is enlarged in the final play into the belligerent threat of the radio voice which erupts ultimately into a physical

The tactics of Barnes and Hill, in fighting for better pay and conditions for 'wharfies,' seemed to be non-stop aggression... There was violent friction between Barnes and F.P. Walsh of the Federation of Labour, two very strong men indeed. In April 1950 the Waterside Workers' Union, and some others, walked out of the FOL and started their own Trade Union Congress. By so doing they isolated themselves from the general union movement and sat out on a limb, waiting to be cut off. But of this they seemed entirely unaware. Shortly afterwards there were more of the stoppages on the wharves which so infuriated most of the population (282).

It has generally been perceived that F.P. Walsh exploited the 1951 dispute to strengthen his personal power base. After the power of the militant unions had been broken, *The Oxford History of New Zealand* records, "passive arbitration unionism was resumed and prevailed far into the 1960s, dominated until 1963 by the figure of the FOL President, F.P. Walsh (Oliver 359).

assault upon women and men by the male authority-enforcer in the last sequence.

It is through the image of the hammer, therefore, that Renée herself hammers home her ultimately pessimistic message that has been implied in the subtext throughout. The regressive nature of the working class situation once again applies to both males and females, but ultimately it is again the image of the female with her aspirations rendered futile that she places centre stage. The image is made even more disturbing to the audience because Jeannie is heavily pregnant. The implication may be seen in one sense to be a double edged sword, in that the legacy of aspiration for women will continue to go hand in hand with the legacy of the backlash of a violent male reaction against it, and that this terrible legacy will be passed on into the life of the unborn child.¹²³

The female characters in *Setting the Table* may be said to have elements in their make-up which can be related through other plays which have been placed in earlier chronological settings. In other aspects, however, this play breaks new ground in its portrayal of the female experience of the late 1970s and early 1980s as Renée perceives it to be. It is not only that these women have chosen to live in a separatist household. One of the main intentions Renée has in this play is to highlight the female capacity for violence. All of Renée's plays that have been discussed so far

¹²³ Renée has made it clear how she feels about the character of Jeannie at the end of the play:

I think it's really sad – every time I see Jeannie and she looks so optimistic at the end of *Wednesday to Come*...and we think right, she's ready, she's off, you know, how wonderful. But it always makes me feel really sad, because I know, and I've always assumed everybody else would too, that she fails. I mean, it's the optimism of the innocent that's so sad (Warrington 80).

present female characters in circumstances of adversity, and this play is no exception. In all the previous plays, however, the reaction of the women to the violence that is perpetrated on them is to develop and pass on pacifist survival techniques.

Sheila, the protagonist in *Setting the Table*, breaks with female tradition when she rejects the Christian ideology of turning the other cheek and adopts the Old Testament philosophy. In her own words, her solution is in the form of “[an] eye for an eye.” Though in the end, as she points out to Con, her act of vengeance has been more lenient: “I didn’t rape him did I? I hurt him and frightened him” (*STT* 45). Working as she does as a nurse in the hospital during the day, and living in the same household with volunteer helpers at the Haven, it could be argued that Sheila has witnessed a skewed version of the nature of New Zealand society, because she has had to deal so often with the victims and the effects of violence. Sheila describes the cases she deals with on a day to day basis to her companions, and so to the audience. The woman she has treated recently, “badly bruised, ripped, bleeding and shocked” with “her breasts covered with bites,” who nevertheless felt ashamed because she blamed herself for the attack (25). Many others she has dealt with have been raped by their husbands or by men who were known to them, others have been beaten up by their husbands.

Sheila has observed with a growing dismay the indifference of society at large to the plight of these women, who form a cross section of

society.¹²⁴ Their immediate family often blame the women themselves for the attack. She recalls the reaction of the father of the girl who had been raped, who rationalised what had happened by saying, “it was her fault for coming to Auckland!” (45). Throughout the play there is no indication that the police assist in any way the women who are trying to help the women and children who are the victims of domestic violence. They have a tradition of turning a blind eye to “domestic situations” no matter what happens. Sheila has observed also the relative unwillingness of the courts to even punish those “reported and charged” where only “a few – a very few – get jail” (45).¹²⁵

So when Sheila comes across a victim who has been raped and can identify her attacker, she takes the law into her own hands. She sets upon him in the dark in order to make him understand how his victim must have felt. In surprising, terrifying, partly stripping and humiliating him, Sheila re-enacts upon the attacker something of the horrific experience that he has put his victim through. In condemning him without trial she puts him through the judgement that society makes on the victim. In stabbing him

¹²⁴ *Mercy Buckets*, a play written in 1987 and as yet unperformed, also has a theme of domestic violence. In it Tiger, a young girl of nineteen, is in a violent relationship with her boyfriend. During the course of the action she appears with “bruises...on her face and...limping” (*Mercy Buckets* 71). The woman who takes her in and gives her a bed on the couch, Phoebe, has at one stage in her life been married to a man from a respectable and well-to-do family, who, for no apparent reason, has raped and assaulted an old woman. Later it turns out that as a boy he had been repeatedly beaten by his father when he tried to defend his mother from being attacked by his father. Thus the cycle of violence is shown to perpetuate itself and brutalise those who are caught up in it. In the radio play *Sisters to Dragons*, the mother consistently emotionally abuses the daughter who she has also physically abused in her childhood. Another radio play, *My Name Is Marama Kingi*, deals with the young girl of the title being chased and terrified by would-be attackers.

¹²⁵ On February 19, 1999 the National news reported that the Law Society had voiced its concern that some police were not acting to enforce the Domestic Violence Act of 1995. It was stated that some policemen did not see the area of domestic violence as “real policing”.

she herself violates the code of the female tradition. Sheila has, in this one decisive act, transmuted the metaphor of the man with the hammer into physical action, and in so doing has wrested the metaphorical hammer from the hand of the oppressor and transferred it into female hands, where it has become an actual weapon in the form of a knife. In this she takes the retaliatory action of Iris one stage further. In her hands it becomes a weapon to be wielded on behalf of all women against all male oppressors, whether they be individual or collective, named or unnamed.

Having provided Sheila with ample motivation for her particular response, Renée now provides the audience with the spokesperson for an alternative philosophy in the form of Assy. Sheila remains, throughout the play, unrepentant for her actions. As she comments to Assy, there are some moments when she considers going even further: "Perhaps I should've killed the bastard" (20). Assy, on the other hand, considers the knee-jerk retaliation of violence against violence to be too simplistic a solution and wants to find an alternative that is identifiable as female: "if we all decided that violence was not going to be our thing we'd think of other answers. Because we'd have to. Violence is too easy...why should we use that kind of weapon" (46).

Sheila and Assy remain philosophically at odds over this issue throughout the play. The other central characters join with them in the debate. Con too is opposed to the use of violence, but for a different reason. Her main motivation is to protect the women and children in the Haven, and she sees the greatest good in providing them with a stress-free and secret environment. For her, violence is too controversial a solution

because it brings with it publicity and too much dangerous exposure. Rose takes a different perspective, that the women themselves have put themselves in a pressure cooker of stress because they are trying to live alternative lives, to hold down full-time jobs and to work out non-traditional philosophies, all at the same time, so that “our lives are so bloody busy we don’t have the extra energy to thrash things out” (41).

Yet, despite all the philosophical discussion among the women about the most effective way to combat the level of violence in New Zealand society, the ultimate consequence of their decisions to set up a separatist household and for Con and Assy to work as volunteers at the Haven is that the solution itself inflames violence. Near the end of *Setting the Table* the representation of the offstage male threat which began in *Jeannie Once* and continued in *Wednesday to Come* erupts ferociously onto the stage. In *Setting the Table* an irate husband, whose family has sought shelter in the Haven, cannot face his own problems, and instead shifts the blame to the women who have helped his wife. Female bonding yet again appears to be an unbearable threat, and in their inability to cope, this man and his friend resort to attacking the house where the central characters live, and smashing a window. Near the end of the play they invade the stage, beat up Con, intimidate the women with a knife, and threaten to slash their faces. The women retaliate, and amid all the kicks and blows, even Assy ends up disarming the man who had been holding up Rose with a knife and holding the knife to his throat. She confesses to the group of women after the incident, “I was so wild then. I’d have killed him if he hadn’t moved back” (51). The offstage male threat has now

come onstage in the form of two men with fists and a knife. In her initial act of vengeance Sheila had effectively wrested the hammer from male into female hands, and transformed it into a dagger. By the end of *Setting the Table* the dagger is being wielded by both sides and open warfare has briefly broken out between the sexes. But it is the women who win. At the end of the fight the men, beaten and subdued, take themselves off the stage.¹²⁶

Music as a Reflection of Theme

In *Pass It On*, Renée once again deploys her technique of using music to make her thematic concerns clear to the audience. The Sunday school hymn “Dare to be a Daniel,” starting

Dare to be a Daniel
 Dare to stand alone
 Dare to have a purpose true
 And dare to make it known

is sung by Jeannie to comfort Gus, her husband, when his family has cut him off because of his involvement with the Waterfront strike. Gus protests affectionately to his wife at the time, “Now come on. Only boys sing that” (*PIO* 53). The allusion to the Biblical episode of Daniel in the lion’s den may be applied to all who stand alone in the face of physical danger. In singing this song Jeannie metaphorically carries her pocketing of the mouth organ at the end of *Wednesday to Come* to its ultimate

¹²⁶ Renée herself has had second thoughts since about creating such “cardboard cut outs” of characters (see note 120): “I should have had the guy [the husband] come in earlier, and I should have shown some human quality about him...but he is one dimensional” (Warrington 87).

conclusion. Throughout that play she had demanded a mouth organ of her own, the symbol of a female “voice” in society. Jeannie, in singing the song, assumes the role of the warrior, and passes it on through the female line. For Jeannie has the strength not only to stand alone politically against the odds. She will, within five years, as Renée predicts, have to stand on her own emotionally and financially when her marriage breaks up.

Jeannie is, thus, in many ways the bridge that links the females of *Setting the Table* with their ancestors in the past. For by the 1980s the women in the separatist household are all Daniels, often having to stand alone, in stress situations or in physical danger, and also single in terms of marital status. It is also interesting to note that Renée has provided a transition character as a link between the activists and the audience in Liz, comparable to Nell in *Pass It On*. The significant difference is in the nature of her learning process. When Liz says, “I’m starting to see things clearer than I’ve ever seen before” (*STT* 43), it could be Nell speaking, save that Liz’s educators are feminists and she is in the process of becoming an integral part of their separatist circle. The re-orientation that is taking place in Liz may be said to be indicative of the re-orientation that is taking place in the writing of Renée.

Throughout *Setting the Table* the women are shown to be in the process of putting together some sketches for a revue which is being rehearsed for performance at the Christmas celebrations of a women’s group. They use the vehicle of the genre to take the tunes of popular songs, which the audience of the early 1980s would have immediately recognised, and, by writing new words, to reverse the original function of

the song as a celebration of heterosexual romance. In the original version of "The Girl that I Marry" the male describes his future partner "as soft and as sweet as a nursery" and as "a doll I can carry." In this version the partner is viewed from the female perspective and he becomes instead "crude and disgusting" and "A burden I'll carry." She anticipates that "our mating / will just be a ruin" because "he'll be spewin'" and will be too drunk to perform sexually (23).

One of the most famous pop songs of the 1950s, "Love Me Tender," renowned for its naivety, in this context becomes an ironic commentary on a skit about a furtive and grubby sexual encounter. So Renée, through the device of the musical revue, like her protagonists, presents an alternative view, where courtship is portrayed as being offensive to the female, because the male is drunken, violent and insensitive to her needs. Though she sweetens the pill of her musical commentary with a coating of humour, the musical dimension of *Setting the Table* mirrors the plot in that it forms a series of highly subversive texts which challenge the very foundations of the myths of romantic heterosexual courtship and marriage.

Indeed, she goes further, before hostility between the sexes erupts into open warfare on the stage towards the end of the play. In the "Janet and John" skit the husband and wife are shown to be in open physical combat. The drunken husband is crudely dismissive of his son, and is proposing to abuse his daughter. The wife throws a filled plate in the husband's face. The whole family is exposed as a desperately unhappy unit, performing their traditional functions like clockwork toys because of their conditioning. The children, like the parents, are caught up in an

endless cycle of abuse, just like the families that the women try to help at the Haven.¹²⁷

Open physical hostility between males and females is one example of how the musical dimension of the play both reflects and parallels the plot. Another is in the person of Maxwell, the police inspector. His name appears at first to be innocuous enough, but after he exits from scene two, Liz begins to strum and sing a chorus from a Beatles' song: "Bang bang Maxwell's silver hammer came down on her head" (40). Although she does not sing it, the rest of the chorus, as most of the original audience would have known, is "Bang bang Maxwell's silver hammer made sure that she was dead." If the anonymous policeman who attacked the marchers at the end of *Pass It On* is the first embodiment on the stage of the image of the man with the hammer, that Jeannie's Dadda passed on to her long before 1879, then, in the person of Maxwell, that male attacker becomes not only translated on to the stage, but is for the first time given a face, and character, as well as a name that connects him firmly to the metaphor.

Maxwell, one embodiment of the man with the hammer, and representative of that hammer also as the spokesperson of the collective male threat, is not, however, an entirely unsympathetic character. Despite the fact that he does appear to be irked by the fact that the women live together, for he makes a pointed reference to it, and that he appears to be

¹²⁷ A similar theatrical technique of using the genre of the revue, with easily recognisable tunes set to alternative lyrics, as a means by which to comment on and challenge the patriarchal structures of society, was also used by Renée in *What Did You Do In the War Mummy?* And *Asking for It*. The technique was adapted but retained a similar intent in the musical play *Born to Clean*.

so acutely conscious of their marital status, or lack of it, for he painstakingly refers to each of them as "Miss" at every available opportunity, and despite the fact that he is given to innuendo about their presumed sexual preference, he does, in fact, seem to try to do his job impartially. One of the reasons why he comes to the women's house in the first place is because a neighbour has reported seeing two men smashing one of their windows and running away. In this respect he is at least correct in following up a complaint, and in the end he has identified the culprits. So although he is the embodiment of the collective, anonymous male threat to the working class as a whole, as an individual in respect to this group of women, he is given a relatively more benign characterisation.

The problem is, as Renée sees it, that by the 1980s, communications between women such as these and the police force in general are now crippled by suspicion on both sides. Maxwell does appear to try to be fair and just, within the law as it stands, but the women's distrust is so extreme that they no longer have any faith in the police force to protect them, even when they urgently need it. They do not ring up to complain about the smashed window. Even when physically attacked at the end of the play, far from reporting the assault, they hide all trace of it from Maxwell when he arrives, even though one of them has been stabbed.

Renée, therefore, once again presents us with a social concern which has been present throughout her work. As a writer, she, like her protagonists in this play, displays a profound mistrust in the capacity of the whole system of Law and Order either to administer justice or to defend the democratic rights of the New Zealand citizens it purports to be

there to protect. Part of the cyclical nature of the female experience in her plays is that often her protagonists feel the need to break the law as it stands in order to serve a natural justice that protects human rights. So Jeannie rescues Martha from the madhouse, young Jeannie feeds the families of the watersiders, and Sheila takes revenge on the rapist.

But also, by way of contrast, Maxwell provides in the play not only the function of a persistent thematic concern, but also a break with the cyclical patterns that have gone before. In the end, he provides a different ending to the story of the man with the hammer, and in the end Jeannie's hopeful prediction, made in 1879, comes true. The man with the hammer does not always win. For Maxwell never finds out who attacked the man in the park. He suspects it was Sheila, but because her companions cover up the evidence and hide the knife, he cannot prove it, and so she is never arrested. So in his stage presence, both the metaphor and the actual physical threat of the male oppressor have been rendered temporarily impotent. When open warfare breaks out between the sexes near the end of the play, the hammer becomes a knife, this time in the hands of the men, but it is the women who win the fight and turn the knife on their attackers. The women in the end dismiss them and the men leave in silence with their tails between their legs.

These women may have found a "voice" in society, but in order to do so they have had to assume the role of the aggressors. The hammer in the end goes hand in hand with the mouth organ, as the symbolism of the hammer side by side with the mouth organ on the kitchen table in the final set in *Wednesday to Come* suggested. In the end violence proves to be a

double-edged sword that provides a solution at the cost of self-brutalisation. Towards the end of the play Sheila admits, when Assy challenges her, that she actually enjoyed attacking her victim. She recognises then, that “violence is power. I liked it. The feeling of power” (*STT* 47). In this respect, the female, even within this feminist work, is in this regard proven to be just as capable of violence as the male. The point is further underlined when even Assy, the most committed pacifist of the group, finds herself holding a knife at the throat of the man who attacks the people she cares about most in the world. At that moment she, until then the counterpoint of Sheila, comes to share the same emotions. Her words could be Sheila’s the previous night when she attacked the rapist: “I was so wild then. I’d have killed him” (51) (see page 151). An important distinction is made, however. The women only act in retaliation, and are more merciful and more moral. Sheila could not rape and does not seriously wound the alleged rapist. Assy is mortified to discover her own capacity for violence.

Perhaps the most telling musical image in this play is taken from the pop song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree.” The original song celebrates this gesture as the action of a female indicating her willingness to marry and mate with the male. In this play, “the old oak tree” comes to symbolise an erect penis and wrapping a yellow ribbon around it becomes an act of retaliation on behalf of the female to frighten and humiliate him. In carrying out her act of vengeance Sheila not only subverts the original meaning of the song by linking it with an action of

sexual abuse, but also sabotages the lyric to turn male sexual prowess into an object of ridicule.

In *Belle's Place* the re-working of the original intentions of the romantic ballad is taken a step further. In this play the popular song which was originally written to become part of the heterosexual courtship ritual is adapted to the homosexual situation. "Falling in Love Again," the musical theme, is played at the end of the play to facilitate the re-union of same-sex couples.

Granna's Riddle: The Link with the Past and the Aspiration for the Future

The pivotal influence of Granna, acting as keeper of the largely unwritten female working class experience, during the ritual of the reading of the tea leaves, compounds the image of the unfinished dress, as the symbol of female aspiration, into the more complex image of the formal dance. In *Jeannie Once* the image of the dance is often associated with the link with a happier past, but it is also linked with the rebellious female and the promise of finding a partner. Granna foresees a new-found happiness in the future. The finished dress is being worn at a ball and the implication with the image is that the dance is part of a social occasion which will formally introduce young Jeannie to her future marriage partner.

Yet, as a counterbalance, Granna also foresees that young Jeannie will become another cog in the cyclical wheel of the frustration of female aspiration. Young Jeannie's first claim to having an equal "voice" in

society is to join the march of the unemployed on Wellington in 1934. As soon as Jeannie asks “Can I go too?” (*WTC* 39), asking for an equal right, along with her brother, to have a “voice” in the political world, Granna remembers when she, then also a young Jeannie, made a similar protest: “Jeannie went marching a long time ago” (39). When Jeannie asks “What was it about?” Granna replies

What it’s always about Jeannie. It’s asking and getting no for an answer. And then asking a bit louder and a bit louder. And then – sometimes – if you’re lucky – you get a little of what you asked for and then – it starts all over again. And you wonder – you do Jeannie – do they ever listen? (40).

Viewed in this context the ending of *Pass It On* becomes bitterly ironic. Young Jeannie has now become Jeannie, the grown woman of the 1951 Waterfront dispute. She, like Granna, has gone marching again. She, like Granna, has claimed the right to have an equal “voice” in society. The sight of the pregnant Jeannie staggering across the stage, having been shocked by witnessing police violence, is the dominant image of the ending of the play. The man with the hammer appears to have won yet again.

The optimism passed on through Granna’s oral mythology, however, is not entirely annihilated. The final words of the play, “Pass it on” (*PIO* 59) not only repeat the title, but end the trilogy. They are spoken by young Jeannie as she starts handing out her notices again. “Pass it on” was the actual phrase printed on the back of the bulletins printed by the watersiders in 1951. In selecting this phrase to end the trilogy Renée enlarges its historical context and turns it into a key motif of her own. For the counterpoint to this writer’s pessimism is her indestructible faith in the

durability of female bonding, as is reflected in the titles of the three plays that form the trilogy. The figure of the strong woman who assumes the leadership position in *Jeannie Once* recurs throughout the generations. The ability of women to *pass it on* is reflected in the oral tradition that is passed on through the generations.¹²⁸ And the ultimate aspiration is for the time of a *Wednesday to come*, a magical day that never actually materialises in the plays but which is the metaphor for a future in which the images of the unfinished dress, the table, the hammer, the mouth organ, the coffin and the dance may be reconciled.

The last words of the play assert yet again that the only glimmer of hope lies in the passing on of their history and records of their aspirations between one generation of women and the next. Yet with the final image of the play too, there is the element of another development which promises to be progressive. This time the history is shown to have been written down for the first time in the plays placed in chronological order of the setting. It is not stories that young Jeannie is passing on, but notices. Her message is passed on to the public at large and not privately within a select group. And the message is no longer being passed on just between females. The final gesture of the play is of a lone male accepting Jeannie's leaflet. Others, representing the power structure of the majority, have refused, but he accepts. Perhaps there are those who have begun to listen.

It is Con, another strong woman who has assumed a leadership

¹²⁸ As Renée explained in an article in the *Otago Daily Times*, "The point of getting out the illegal bulletins was to give the other side of the story" (Harris, L., "Women's Role"). In a similar way, by presenting history from the female point of view in this trilogy, Renée is presenting her own "other side of the story."

position, in *Setting the Table*, who compounds Granna's mythology by adding to it the image of the dinner party. By the time this play is set, the table has become associated with the re-defined "family" of the separatist feminist household. So Con allies the image only with the female when she explains the symbol of the re-defined table, which has become the emblem of her group, and which they have scratched on the back of the camellia badges that they wear: "Look we're setting the table ... All those women we know about and the hundreds we don't ... They got the ingredients ready and cooked the dinner" (STT 51). Those who prepared for the alternative "family" situation in *Belle's Place*, therefore, according to Con, are not only those who have been identified in the plays as being part of the oral tradition from 1879 to the 1970s, but also the others who remain still in silence and secrecy, for the metaphor is an inclusive one. Con sees her generation as still being part of the preparation process, as she says:

now we've got as far as setting the table. Oh I know it seems as though we'll never sit down to the dinner-party. Well maybe we won't. But we'll get the table ready. Us and all the ones we don't know about (51).

The women of the late 1970s are still "setting the table," as the title of the play suggests in the sense that the re-defined family is still in the process of integrating itself into a unit.

Around the table at *Belle's Place* sit a group of people from different generations who, like the women in *Setting the Table*, have come to the self-realisation that they need to define themselves into an alternative version of the traditional family unit. *Belle's Place* is the first

play in chronological order of setting in which we have seen a dinner being fully prepared and served. It is served in this play because around this table now sit not only females but males of like inclination, and they are all part of a developing movement which is made up of many interconnected units all over New Zealand. The tone of both *Setting the Table* and *Belle's Place* is therefore ultimately more optimistic than was the trilogy. For it becomes clear through the examination of the re-definition of the table and the metaphor of the meal in preparation, that Renée considers this movement for women in society as she sees it in the 1970s and 80s to be a progressive one.

The table in *Belle's Place* remains a prominent image on the stage throughout the play, not only as a facilitator for the bonding of a non-traditional family unit, but as the centre of a continuing debate. By the 1980s, the focus of that debate has shifted. This time the enemy is not the male sex as a whole, but the power structure dominated by the majority. Belle, the counterpart to Sheila in the 1980s, believes also in the Old Testament philosophy, though her retaliation is in the non-violent female tradition. She takes revenge on her sister for past wrongs by preparing and eating the meal on her side of the stage without offering her sister any share of it. As such she represents those in the gay movement that insist on the ultimate necessity for separatism. Her guests, however, not only feel embarrassed at her inhospitality, but in the end are unable to eat at all. Eventually Rita reaches across the rope that divides the stage and shares her meal with Laura. Rita, in her thirties, and a generation younger than

Belle, represents a less bitter philosophy that is more disposed to forgiveness.

The progress of the meal that is being served and eaten on stage, therefore, becomes the metaphor for the debate which is central to the play – whether the re-defined family should remain separatist, or whether it should attempt to become inter-related with the rest of New Zealand society. Renée, in this play, through the development of this metaphor, indicates her preference for the latter solution. For it becomes obvious as the play progresses that the meal will never be prepared as it should be as long as the stage remains divided. Belle's guests, for example, have to drink the champagne that has been brought to celebrate her birthday from the kitchen cups because the glasses are on Laura's side of the stage.

In this sense *Belle's Place* still represents an intermediary stage in the aspiration that is summarised in the image of the table. The possibility of the fairy tale happy ending is realised only in part. Belle's guests can only be themselves on holidays or Sundays. Cary is still married, is leading a double life, and is still so conditioned that he cannot consummate his relationship with Duke. Cary also is criticised by Belle's other guests. He has not signed the petition in support of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill, which he and his community so desperately need to be made law, because he is afraid that his boss might see him doing it, and that he might lose his job. The characters in this play, therefore, through the nature of their lifestyles, and also through their names, are linked with a legacy of the necessity for secrecy concerning the nature of their sexuality which has been passed on through the generations. Cary and

Dietrich have adopted names from famous Hollywood actors who for many years kept their sexual preference hidden from the public. Rita is named from the star of "Gilda," one of the first films ever made in Hollywood with a covert homosexual theme.

The legacy of the effects of the criminalisation of this community still remain in 1985, and in this play the division between the two distinct lifestyles based on sexual preference is never resolved. Until the end the stage remains divided, and the final image of Laura and Belle is of them sitting on either side of the set, still unreconciled.

Yet despite this portrayal of fundamental division, Renée's forecast for the future remains essentially optimistic. She predicts, through the action of Rita reaching across the stage divide, that it will be the gay community that will make the first step in the attempt to be reconciled with the rest of society. Yet contained within the gesture of reconciliation that Rita makes is also the qualification that the concept of inter-relation carries with it the right to an open expression of sexual preference. In this sense this play looks forward to the future, and takes it for granted that the Reform Bill will one day eventually be passed. Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s the ever present threat of punishment by imprisonment dictated that the gay community remain hidden. Renée claims the right for open courtship rituals for all in the future through the image of the dance.

In *Dancing* the women dance together between scenes. In this play, the dance becomes the symbol of female bonding. As Josie explains: "women are stopped from enjoying each other's company. It's frowned on ... It's not just dancing – but that symbolised it, for me" (*D* 17).

In *Belle's Place* the dance becomes representative not only of homosocial bonding but of the sexual aspirations of the women. The play is given an alternative version of the fairy tale ending when Rita and Dietrich are reconciled and give every indication of living happily ever after together. Their union is celebrated by Belle and her friends with the same ceremonies that have been developed traditionally for heterosexual courtship rituals. At the end of the play the two sets of lovers dance together to a romantic ballad called "Falling In Love Again," though Laura, as representative of the "straight community" and the majority who can employ power, still refuses to have anything to do with the proceedings.

As that representative she is shown to have her own chronic sexual problems. It is through her own desperation, which prompts her to come and visit her sister, that she is forced to face up to the fact that the gay community not only exists, but is functioning within her own family. For Laura's daughter, Amanda, it turns out, is gay and very keen to meet up with Belle at her "Place." The split stage therefore becomes the symbol of the psychological barrier between the two sets of lifestyles.

Belle, as the representative of the advocates of separatism, proves in the end to be more flexible than her sister. She reaches across and "holds out a hand" (*BP* 84) to Laura in the final moments. Her gesture of reconciliation is rejected "LAURA *refuses*" (84). Laura's inability to accommodate what is happening before her eyes or to join in the dance therefore becomes symbolic of the attitude she represents.

Thus through the development of images Renée suggests that although the means to nurture the homosexual family unit is being developed in New Zealand in the early 1980s, this minority community still remains unacceptable to the majority of members of New Zealand society.

The image of the dance continues to carry with it connotations of family happiness, of a linkage with the past, of the promise of a future partner, and of the prediction for rebellion of the female against the status quo. The dance, therefore, comes to represent not only happiness, but also defiance. For example, in *Jeannie Once* Honoria, whilst burning her husband's Bible, calls out to her dead and her live children to dance with her. In *Pass It On*, Nell and Cliff, the only happily married couple in the plays discussed so far, dance at a social to raise money for the Relief Depots. In *Dancing* the women dance together despite male ridicule about "tits banging together" (D 17), and *Belle's Place* ends with the image of Rita and Dietrich and Cary and Duke dancing together in full view of a disapproving Laura.

Through the linkage of the recurrent images in her work Renée herself predicts a time for women in the future when their aspirations will be fulfilled, which includes the expectation that the homosexual household will be able to take for granted its right to exist as an alternative family unit, fully accepted publicly as well as privately. The women in the finished dresses will one day sit at table at a dinner party with all the trappings. After the meal they will join in the dance with the partner of

their choice.¹²⁹ Thus the concept of the dance in this play brings together both physical couples and literary motifs.

The compound metaphor comes with the prediction that Granna made when she linked the image of the dress to the dance, as to the deepest riddle that lies at the bottom of the cup. The finished dress that Granna has foreseen has not eventuated. By the middle of the 1980s the possibilities for strong women such as young Jeannie, Sheila and Belle to develop lifestyles suited to their own individual needs are becoming more open. Nonetheless aspirations are only partially fulfilled. And the potential the riddle points to is yet to be unravelled.

¹²⁹ In September 1977 *Broadsheet* published a review of Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party," an exhibition put on at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On three tables thirty-nine table settings representing thirty-nine women of the past with "larger than life ceramic plates, flatware and chalices, each set on embroidered runners" were placed on a base in which were written the names of 999 gifted women. Judy Chicago chose the image of the dinner party for the exhibition because she saw it as a metaphor for women's lives, with centuries spent in creating edibles that were immediately consumed (Harris, J., "Vulvas on plates" 35). It could be that Renée was influenced by the metaphor of the dinner party in this exhibition when developing her own complex metaphor. Judith Dale makes this point also, "This may be an intertextuality from Judy Chicago's project; in New Zealand the guests past and present (some of whose lives Renée and other playwrights celebrate) have not yet been invited" (170).

Chapter 3: The 1990s

Sonja, Daisy, Flora and Gertrude: Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?

During the 1990s Renée has turned her attention as a writer from plays to novels. This chapter will seek to ascertain whether the same philosophic viewpoint, thematic concerns, imagery and writing techniques that have been identified so far may be seen to have been transferred to her full length prose works, and also whether and by what means they have been extended or adapted. The works most closely examined in this chapter will be *Willy Nilly* (1990), *Daisy and Lily* (1993), *Does This Make Sense to You?* (1995) and *The Snowball Waltz* (1997). All of these novels are set in the 1990s, although *Willy Nilly* and *The Snowball Waltz* refer to the past to place the present in context, and *Daisy and Lily* and *Does This Make Sense To You?* contain parts in which the earlier lives of the protagonists are narrated.

It may then be possible to identify some of the salient characteristics of Renée's work as a whole, particularly in relation to her views on the changing roles of women in New Zealand society from the 1870s until the present day, from her perspective as a feminist, a socialist and a lesbian. Finally, some tentative conclusions will be drawn about the nature of her artistry and about the artistic and literary qualities of her oeuvre.

The Finished Dress?

The unfinished dress, as the image employed to represent female aspiration, appeared on the stage as finished for the first time in *Belle's Place*, albeit of a different colour and being worn by a male who identified himself with the female. In *Daisy and Lily* this variation of the image of the dress is further developed in relation to Uncle Auntie, another homosexual cross-dresser, who represents the 1990s version of a Cary. Uncle Auntie not only dresses openly as a female all the time, but in outrageous outfits and resplendent colours. The description of Uncle Auntie in her "fancy ensembles" (*D&L* 19) is peppered throughout the novel. At one time she wears "a bright violet suit and hat with a burnt orange frilly blouse and high heeled shoes to match" (60). At another time she appears

resplendent in jet black, froth of white lace at the neck...[with] black stockings, high-heeled black patent leather shoes and...a large black picture hat with huge red velvet roses rioting across the brim (67).

Even in her coffin she looks "resplendent in the mauve and orange and the matching wig" (127). In accordance with the flamboyant habits of a drag-queen Uncle Auntie appears not only in one dress, but in many, and not only with all the trimmings, but with all the accessories too. The image of the dress in this novel, therefore, not only represents a fulfilled "female" aspiration, but also a rejection of the solution of secrecy and a demand for the right of all individuals to be accepted as they are within society.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ A similar variation of the image of the dress appears to have been developed in Renée's own life. In *Yin and Tonic* in the piece entitled "When I'm grown up" she recounts her aspirations to "have a shining long pink dress like my auntie's which I would

Although some of the characters such as Auntie Maureen may be embarrassed in the company of such open rebels, Uncle Auntie is accepted, albeit grudgingly, within Auckland society.

In *Wednesday to Come* the regression for women in the early 1930s had been reflected not only in the receding of the image of the blue dress, from physical reality into myth, but by the concrete image of the coffin in the sitting room. The traumatic entry of Ben's coffin near the beginning of the play and the placing of it come to represent in the split stage set a splitting between the male and the female as an indication of separation. However in *Daisy and Lily* the positive connotations associated with the image of the dress are continued despite the coffin. Those who gather around the coffin of Uncle Auntie to mourn her loss are able to come together with all barriers between them broken down. Prostitutes mingle with the respectable, homosexual with heterosexual, Maori with Pakeha, blood kin with strangers, and even male with female. Unlike Ben's, Uncle Auntie's coffin proves to be a unifying rather than a splintering force. Through the re-deployment of the images of the dress and the coffin, along with her illustration of what is possible for the homosexual community within the varying contexts of the novels, Renée appears to view the climate of New Zealand society in the 1990s with a sense of

wear all the time and not just to balls" (*Yin and Tonic* 80). The colour pink features also in "Why I like Auckland," in which she recalls making a feminist political protest dressed in "a pink picture hat with roses on it, a pink crepe mother-of-the-bridegroom outfit, pink gloves, and carrying a pink purse with a brick in it" (*Y&T* 128).

The picture hat recalls the symbolism relating to Uncle Auntie's ensemble in *Daisy and Lily*. The hat and the colour pink appear thus to carry with them connotations of rebellion. In *Pink Spots and Mountain Tops* the North Island Pink Spotted Purple Dotted Dancing Moa is female, and in her colouring also carries connotations of feminism and rebellion.

relative optimism.

The Table

In *Setting the Table*, located in the late 1970s or early 1980s, there appeared for the first time a table associated with the possibility of serving a full dinner. But the dinner never actually appeared on the set. It was served and eaten between scenes. It was only referred to as part of the compounding of female mythology into the image of the dinner party, where the serving of the full meal comes to be symbolic of the fruition of aspiration for the female. As the title suggests, the women in this play are still in the process of preparing the means by which this aspiration may one day be fulfilled.

In *Belle's Place*, set in 1985, a full dinner is served for the first time. But this meal, far from being celebratory, is eaten in an atmosphere of disharmony and the play ends with the rope of division still bisecting the stage, which divides the homosexual community from Belle's sister, Laura, who represents the judgmental heterosexual majority.

The image of the kitchen table is therefore developed into a more complex image in the works set in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, to become associated with the serving of the full dinner, which itself becomes the symbol for the fruition of aspiration for the re-defined family unit based on the gay couple.

In her novels, all set in the 1990s, at least in their frame-situations, Renée re-deploys this compound image, which has become one of the

most idiosyncratic features of her artistry, to explore the means by which the re-defined family unit may be inter-related with society at large.

The serving of food at the kitchen table, particularly the preparation of scones, was identified as a ritualistic ceremony for the expression of consolation for grief and deprivation in *Wednesday to Come*. In the novels of the 1990s food is again served ritualistically, but this time as a bonding mechanism by which to promote understanding between those of diverse opinions and lifestyles.

In *Willy Nilly* this mechanism is in constant process throughout the novel. When Polly, reared in a lesbian family, decides to marry Luke, reared in a heterosexual family, the two sets of parents are brought together around Sonja's kitchen table. So the kitchen table, which is such a distinctive stage prop, and such a significant image, in the plays, is transferred to the novels to take on an equally important function in the revealing of significant themes to the reader. Sonja's partner, Evvie, and Luke's mother prepare the food. Though there are awkward silences, the two sets of parents come to accept each other during the meal and to jointly plan the arrangements for the wedding. These awkward initial silences recur when breakfast is served for Theo and his partner Roland, but it is during this meal that Polly and her grandmother Alice come to some understanding of how Theo came to be a sperm donor and so become Polly's father. Alice then in turn makes fritters for Evvie, and during the course of the meal they are able to communicate for the first time. Sonja is preparing a meal when Cyn, her former lover, is introduced to Evvie, and Evvie and Sonja eat breakfast together at the same table to

make up a row. Finally food and drink is served to bring everyone, of all different persuasions, together at the wedding ceremony at the end of the novel. This is still not a full dinner party and the wedding reception will take place after the meal ends, but at least there is now the prospect that the celebratory meal will be served.

In *Daisy and Lily* a meal is served in the presence of Uncle Auntie's coffin to bond together all those who have come to grieve for her. In *Does This Make Sense To You?* Ka renews her bond with her friend Flora, whom she has not seen for nearly thirty years, by serving her a meal at the kitchen table and later taking her out to dinner. In *The Snowball Waltz* all hatchets are buried at the end of the novel as everyone who loves Gertrude gathers at a meal to celebrate her birthday.

All these meals are served to bond together family units which provide alternatives to the traditional nuclear family. Both *Willy Nilly* and *Daisy and Lily* are mainly concerned with the formation of the lesbian family that is also linked to the gay community. *Does This Make Sense to You?* examines the bonding between extended families made up entirely of females, in the nursing home and at Ka's place for example. There is much less of a sexual dimension to the relationships between the women in this novel than in the others, but they still form a unit in which to nurture each other, the fruition of an arrangement foregrounded in *Dancing*, set in 1980. In *The Snowball Waltz* Gertrude is a solo parent who has reared almost singlehandedly two generations of children, her daughter and her two granddaughters. *Finding Ruth*, *Jeannie Once*, *I Have To Go Home* and *The Snowball Waltz* all have central characters who are

also solo mothers. (See page 6). Also in *Groundwork*, Ellen, one of the central characters, has been reared by a solo mother.

The tone of optimism contained within the image of the full meal being served at table, which bonds together and strengthens the re-defined “family,” and at the same time integrates its members into the rest of society, is highlighted further by the development of a new image, that of the garden, which is trellised through the novels.

In *The Snowball Waltz* Gertrude nurtures seedlings for her nursery throughout the action of the novel. Gertrude as nurturer of young plants comes to represent Gertrude as nurturer of people, who at the end of the novel is able to bring together people of different ilk who may previously have been at odds. Affy Jingle, as a manifestation of the technique of the offstage male threat, comes to embody an opposing force. When he wrecks Gertrude’s nursery he comes to be representative not only of the force of a destructive backlash against non-conformity, but also of lack either of the capacity for personal growth or of the ability to nurture relationships with other human beings. Although the image of the garden is associated with both male and female characters in the novels (for example Ollie, the most gentle male in *The Snowball Waltz*, is obsessed with growing orchids), it is predominantly through the association of the female with this image that Renée emphasises the capacity for personal development and growth.

The re-deployment of the image of the garden is to be found in Renée’s three other novels, and in each case the transformation of a

wilderness into a garden is associated with personal growth and closer bonding in one form or another.

In *Does This Make Sense To You?*, Flora, a keen gardener, begins to build another garden in Ka's desolate back yard. Planting a bay tree, the symbol of victory, bonds Flora with Annie, Ka's young pregnant charge, to such an extent that Annie steals plants to demonstrate her growing affection for Flora. At the end of the novel Flora is planning to break away permanently from her husband and children and has made plans to work in a garden shop. So the garden comes to represent her personal growth in bonding with new friends and her potential for growth in the development of a new and more independent lifestyle.

In *Willy Nilly* Evvie builds a garden out of the wasteland that had been Sonja's back yard as a setting for the wedding ceremony which ends the novel. The neglected, messy, back area is described at first in terms of:

the dreary lavenders, the dusty red geraniums, the huge, spreading flax, and the lusty mounds of oxalis and comfrey which surround a lawn composed mainly of kikuyu grass and couch [with] A narrow concrete path, pitted and scarred with age,...[and] the rickety circular clothes-line (*Willy Nilly* 7).

Evvie's labour transmutes it into:

a curvy edge ... [in front of] Queensland umbrella trees,...fronted by small shrubs and flowers, and along the other side was a row of lavenders with what Evvie said were pinks and verbena curling their way around the lawn. Down the back some red and white flowers glistened, beads of water dropping from the dark leaves onto the spongy earth (*WN* 87).

The image of a sterile and neglected wilderness suggested in adjectives such as "dreary," "dusty," "narrow," "scarred" and "rickety" is

transformed into the image of lush fecundity suggested in the connotations associated with “curvy,” “curling,” “glistened,” “beads” and “spongy.”

So, through comparing and contrasting images with Biblical associations, Renée suggests the passing of a wilderness period into a paradise garden period which implies a new Genesis of understanding and growth in relationships. The marriage ceremony finally takes place in the re-created Garden of Eden setting.

In *Daisy and Lily* Daisy labours indefatigably to build a garden from scratch out of the neglected wilderness surrounding the home she and Lily set up together. In her traumatised state, after being raped and literally part-buried alive, Lily is no longer capable of any physical relationship with another human being. Not only is she unable to express any sexual emotion, but her phobia about dirt means that she has to wear gloves all the time, and even then she cannot bear to touch anyone. The garden that Daisy creates becomes symbolic of her lifelong devotion to Lily. However when its flowering comes to express the flowering and fruition that their relationship should have, when they finally set up house together, Daisy, in a fit of frustration at not being able to consummate the partnership, hacks down everything that she has laboured so hard to create:

The sunflowers lay in yellow blobs on the ground. On top of them I threw the prickly branches of the roses, the heads of the sweet william, the azaleas. The pile of clippings grew very quickly. The sharp strong smell of lavender was all around me ... To hell with that Lily, I thought, attacking the daisies, and to hell with this Lily and her not liking to be touched and for breaking my heart. ‘It’s too bloody hard,’ I yelled and banged the shears against the tall Rambler by the gate, ‘it’s too bloody hard!’ (*D&L* 177).

But even amid the destruction, in the restructured Garden of Eden there is hope of healing:

Lily was shaking her head and saying oh Daisy, oh Daisy as she looked at the wreckage. Lily hates the feel of the earth and has asked to be cremated when the time comes. Lily loves words, especially when they're shaped into a poem, and can spend hours looking at flowers, but the soil repels her. And no wonder. But I didn't bloody do it to her. Why should I be the one to be punished? 'It's all too hard Lily,' I said, 'it's too hard'...

The beautiful white head turned to me. 'Daisy,' said Lily. She took the gloves off and, shivering, tears running down her face, she put her arms around me. She put her arms around me and we cried and trembled together and after a while the frenzied miasma which hung over the wreckage of the garden went away (182).

In taking off her gloves and putting her arms around Daisy, Lily is able to physically express her love for her partner for the first time since their re-union. In the re-made mythology of the Garden of Eden even the worst damage of the wilderness period may in part be redeemed. Even the "miasma" of the pollution caused by the serpent is overcome, and in this alternative Genesis it is the evil that is banished, leaving the lovers free to work through their difficulties in a Garden of Eden setting.

The extending of the female continuum of support from one generation to the other, signalled through the recurrence of the female Christian name, is a feature of Renée's literary style that has already been discussed. It is a technique that she continues into her prose writing, as a means by which to bridge the gap between the novels and the plays. In *Does This Make Sense To You?* Flora's husband and children undermine her self esteem, but her mother-in-law Nell is very supportive. Although she has a different surname in the novel, the description of the lifestyle of this Nell is very similar to the one we would have expected the Nell of

Pass It On to have adopted in the wake of the 1951 Waterfront Strike, given that she had a husband “who stood on street corners and harangued passers-by about labour and capitalism and the class struggle” and that she kept “the mean little home spotless” (*Does This Make Sense to You?* 11-12). In *Daisy and Lily*, Daisy, mourning the loss of her friend Lily, who has fled from her in panic, and feeling lonely and isolated, finds consolation in a cemetery deciphering the inscription on the headstone of a woman called Martha born in 1851. Although Daisy does not know the details of Martha’s ancestry, her name and age are consistent with the Martha of *Jeannie Once*, who, like Daisy, is also very conscious of her dark skin, and trying to come to terms with her mixed ancestry.

Both of these examples concern characters from the novels relating to characters traceable in the plays at low ebbs in their lives. Through the handing down of the Christian name the passing on of the female experience could also be implied in the text, in keeping with the moods of the plays, which tend to reflect unfulfilled aspirations. However, the renewed climate of optimism which appears to be indicated in the novels through the re-deployment of the image of the table and the new image of the garden is further emphasised in the novels by the linking of female names to the garden image. Three of the main characters in the novels, Flora, Daisy and Lily, have names associated with flowers and two of them are protagonists.¹³¹

¹³¹ The image of the garden is also to be found in the children’s story *I Have To Go Home* in relation to the positive effects of female bonding. The central theme in the plot is the growth in relationship between the protagonist Sweet Pea and her grandmother Granny Rose.

It may be that the Lily of *Daisy and Lily* significantly resembles another Lily in *Dancing*, whose closest emotional bond is also with a single lifelong friend.¹³² The lifestyle that Lily aspires to at the end of the play, set in 1980, has been realised by the Lily of the novel in the 1990s, and with a greater security of tenure. The house that the earlier Lily can only aspire to rent is owned by the Lily of this decade.

Thus through the development of the image of the unfinished dress, which is finished in the novels, and through the development of the image of the kitchen table, which is compounded into the complex image of the dinner party, in association with the development of the new image of the garden, Renée sounds a note of optimism that in the 1990s the aspirations of the re-defined family unit may be coming to fruition.

The Hammer

In her portrayals of the changing roles of women in New Zealand society in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the plays *Setting the Table* and *Belle's Place*, Renée appeared to suggest that in the climate of the times it was only possible for the homosexual community to operate and thrive in conditions of separation. In her novels set primarily in the 1990s she appears to be suggesting that, a decade later, after the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Act, which made sexual activity between

¹³² *Groundwork*, *Born to Clean* and *Heroines*, *Hussies* and *High High Flyers* also have central characters who have been friends since childhood. *Finding Ruth*, *Pink Spots* and *Mountain Tops* and *I Have To Go Home* all have young girls as protagonists who also have a close school friend. *Jeannie Once* and *Does This Make Sense To You?* feature central characters who have made lifelong friendships.

consenting male adults legal, this minority community can become accepted as a valid sector of the body of New Zealand society, and can even rear children in their own right. In this way Renée implies that the traditional concept of the family unit that has been the norm for so long is long overdue for re-definition, and needs to encompass alternative concepts of what constitutes "family." Moreover, she contends that these alternative models deserve wider social acceptance because, as she illustrates in her novels, they are perfectly viable.

A salient feature of Renée's oeuvre is her insistence on the strength, durability and nurturing effects of the female bond. All of her accessible works to date examine at some stage the positive benefits to the female of the development of this bond. Yet now in her prose there emerges another element: the fully drawn characterisation of a woman who seeks to undermine and destroy other women.¹³³

In *Does This Make Sense To You?* Camille, the matron, is a woman with "beauty, intelligence [and] a formidable presence," according to Flora, who then concludes that she "was the most wantonly evil person I've ever met" (*DTMSTY* 94). Camille administers the brutalising environment of the home for pregnant teenagers with not one jot of compassion. She starves and humiliates the inmates, working them to the point of exhaustion. When placing the babies in adoptive homes, she

¹³³ Laura in *Belle's Place* has colluded with her father to punish her sister, but by the time the play opens in 1985 there appears to be the beginnings of some degree of reconciliation, because Laura visits her sister in time of trouble. The most fully drawn characterisation of the enemy within, in the plays, is Fraser in *Groundwork*, an undercover lesbian detective who has been working to gain the confidence of the other lesbian characters before the play opens, in order to find out the nature of their involvement in the plans to protest against the Springbok Tour in 1981.

denies the young mothers a single opportunity to hold their own babies. She victimises Freddie to the point where the girl would have died from malnutrition and overwork had not Ka and Flora defied the rules in order to protect her. During the thirty six hours of Freddie's excruciating labour, Camille persistently refuses to call a doctor.

In *Daisy and Lily*, Daisy takes pity on Brenda Kelly, a teenager whom she finds has been physically and sexually abused by her father. Daisy takes Brenda into her home and nurtures her, despite her husband Spenser's opinion of Brenda: "She's thick and she's damaged goods. She'll never amount to anything" (*D&L* 48). Daisy stands her ground against her husband's judgement and in the end threatens to leave unless he lets Brenda stay. Daisy rears Brenda, despite her difficulties at school, and even finally talks her employer into giving Brenda a job, even though he is lukewarm about the idea. In return, Brenda, who has now changed her name to Olivia, far from bonding with Daisy, is not merely ungrateful but does her positive harm. She sets about seducing Spenser under Daisy's nose, and in the end runs away with him and eventually marries him.

So, as a counterbalance to the note of optimism contained within the novels set in the 1990s, there lurks within her prose, as in her drama, a threat that becomes even more violent and pervasive as time progresses. In the plays this threat, encapsulated in the metaphor of the man with the hammer, was life threatening, but it was at least easily identifiable. The enemy was most often the male, acting either individually or collectively in the patriarchal institution. In the novels the threat is made more unsettling because the danger can come from within. Females such as

Brenda in *Daisy and Lily* and Camille in *Does This Make Sense to You?* can set out to destroy other females.

The most potent image of the opening chapter of *Daisy and Lily* is that of Uncle Auntie lying dead on the floor, an old man with his wig pulled off by an attacker who has dealt him a fatal blow to the head with a poker. Not only has the image of the man with the hammer been transferred from the plays to the novels, it now appears in an even more deadly form. Uncle Auntie is the first character in all of Renée's work to have been murdered, and it is rumoured that the guilty party is a young queen who needed money for drugs. So the metaphor is transmuted into physical violence in an even more deadly form. Feminised men may be even worse than women and the danger can still come from within. The transformation of the hammer to a poker emphasises the same sexual orientation for both the attacker and the attacked. Far from bonding, one has destroyed the other, not even from any kind of emotion, but from a seemingly impulsive, arbitrary need.

The threat of the off-stage male is also carried through from the plays to the novels, but in several of the prose works the attack on the aspiration of the female is even further highlighted. In *Does This Make Sense To You?* Ka dedicates her life, on a shoestring budget, to helping pregnant teenage girls whose families have rejected them. Yet, because Ka is a lesbian, there is a body of opinion in the community which considers her to be unsuitable for the work. During the course of the novel Ka has a young charge called Annie, who has been made pregnant, it turns out, by Ben, a young medical student. Ben's mates, believing that he is distressed

about Annie living at Ka's place, react in a pattern of mateship that was to be found in *Setting the Table*. They register their protest by throwing a brick through a window.¹³⁴

In *The Snowball Waltz* Affy Jingle embodies this force. Though this novel shows development in working against the two-dimensional characterisations of offstage, threatening males in that it attempts to understand the mentality of such a character, Affy remains, nevertheless, a threat to Gertrude throughout the novel even when he is not present, as a danger which she suspects and fears but cannot positively identify. Affy registers his hatred and resentment of Gertrude by wrecking the nursery which is her major source of income, graffiti-ing her house with a swastika, and finally attempting to set fire to the house while she and her family are still inside.

So although Renée may appear to indicate, on the one hand, that she views the changing role of women in New Zealand society in the 1990s with a sense of optimism, she counterbalances this with her continued use of the image of the man with a hammer and the technique of invoking the sense of the unseen male threat, to suggest that in some senses New Zealand society remains just as unchanging in its patterns of behaviour and just as entrenched in its habit of registering hostility towards the "outsider" by means of violence as it ever was.

Throughout the whole time span covered by her work, Renée,

¹³⁴ When, in the play *Breaking Out*, Paul's mates at the pub overhear him talking about having lesbians in his house visiting his wife, they slash the visitor's tyres in protest and as a deterrent.

through such means, represents New Zealand as a deeply violent society. Her emphasis is usually on the physical abuse of the female by the male, and one of the forms this frequently takes is in the motif of rape. In this respect the rape motif becomes another variation of the image of the man with the hammer in the sense that the penis is used as a weapon of psychological destruction. Aspects of the problems caused to the female psyche by this violation are to be found in harrowing detail in both the plays and the novels.

In *Daisy and Lily*, the group rape that Lily has suffered, in being literally as well as sexually left for dead, has so traumatised her that she is no longer able to physically touch another human being. Daisy's friend Marg has "caught her husband in bed with her little girl and killed him" (*D&L* 167). In *Does This Make Sense To You?* Freddie has been repeatedly raped by her father. In *The Snowball Waltz* group rape is a persistent motif which appears to be passed on relentlessly from one generation of males in the community to the next. At the beginning of the novel Gertrude is raped by three of her school fellows. Then the grandson of the daughter who is born to her as a result of this himself becomes part of a group rape experience as an observer, which has the effect of so changing the contours of his features that he comes to take on the appearance, in the eyes of his great-grandmother, of one of the original rapists.

One of the most chilling instances of rape in the whole of Renée's work is in *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood*. In this play the penis is used as an offensive weapon of repudiation of the lesbian lifestyle. One of the central

characters, now called Tiggy, was once a teacher called Jess Mackie who has been so violently group-raped that she has gone out of her mind. She is now cared for by her partner who was once a teacher in the same school. At the end of the play Tiggy is taken out of her partner's care to be placed in a mental asylum because she is becoming less and less controllable. The authorities refuse to recognise Jess's partner as her next of kin because she is another woman. Thus the play draws attention to the failure of the legal system to recognise in law the lesbian relationship.¹³⁵ This play also, like *Setting the Table*, points out the failure of the system of Law and Order to punish rapists. The men who attacked Jess have never been caught.

Hand in hand with the climate of increased acceptance of difference in the 1990s, therefore, Renée points to a persistent incidence of rape. *The Snowball Waltz*, published in 1997, and spanning a period from the first World War to the late 1990s, has a greater recurrence of the rape motif than any of her other works.

However, in keeping with her counterbalancing mood of optimism for the 1990s, it has to be said that this is the only one of Renée's works to date which recognises any capacity for repentance for the male involved in the act of violating the female. One of the three culprits, Fred, in the end has the courage to apologise face to face to Gertrude for the original rape. Gertrude's great-grandson is not technically a rapist, though he is a fascinated bystander who does nothing to prevent a young woman from

¹³⁵ In a series of articles *Broadsheet* drew attention to the issue of the relationship between the law and the homosexual community. "Lesbians Outside the Laws" in June 1985, for example, outlined the ways in which the lesbian couple were not recognised by the legal system or the Welfare State and suggested strategies by which this problem could be overcome (Forbes 30-31).

being raped. Very shortly afterwards, though, he is mortified by the thought of what he has been involved in, and in the end confesses his part in the unsavoury business to a priest. In so doing he frees himself of guilt, which in turn liberates him to rescue his sister from yet another attempted rape. So in her latest novel, the cycle of corruption is broken.

In *Wednesday to Come* Ben's solution to the pain of living had been to commit suicide. Other characters in the novels opt for this alternative. In *Daisy and Lily*, Shirley, the wife of the local vicar, commits suicide because she can no longer stand being constantly prayed for and forgiven because of having had an affair with Colleen, the wife of the Treasurer of the local amateur dramatic group. In *Does This Make Sense to You?*, the thirteen year old Freddie commits suicide after murdering her own baby, because she has found out that it is destined for the inhumane conditions of the Orphanage, due to its "background [being] unacceptable," because it is the result of incest (*DTMSTY* 142). In *The Snowball Waltz*, Souvie's lover Resa commits suicide after a priest convinces her that her relationship with Souvie is a sin.

The motif of rape which is so prevalent in Renée's output is often associated with images of dirt. In an early work *Secrets*, first performed in 1982, and made up of two short plays, the second play is structured around a monologue, during which the female protagonist constantly sterilises everything she touches.¹³⁶ Her phobia of dirt is linked to the experience of

¹³⁶ Renée has acknowledged the influence of Miriam Saphira in the conception of this play: "I thought of what Miriam was doing on the sexual abuse of children. I talked to her and she loaned me some books" (Warrington 66).

childhood sexual abuse involving her father. This was the first play in New Zealand drama to place the subject of incest centre stage and to devote an entire action to the elucidation of its effects.

Incest forms a distinctive feature of Renée's oeuvre. It was first broached by her in the revues written for *Broadsheet*, *What Did You Do In The War Mummy?* and *Asking For It*. In *Setting the Table* one of the skits the women are rehearsing suggests that a father is about to sexually abuse his daughter. In *Finding Ruth*, the short story "Mothers and Daughters" concerns a father who is beginning to identify his daughter too much in the role of her dead mother. In *Daisy and Lily* Daisy takes Olivia into her own home and rears her as a daughter after she finds out that the girl is being sexually abused by her father. In the short story "Rarely Pure and Never Simple" the protagonist, Pauline, has a daughter who is the result of her having been raped by her own father.

There are images from other of Renée's plays of the woman as cleaner, whose lot in life is to tidy up the unsavoury detritus left by the male. The tandem play in *Secrets* is another monologue, this time delivered by Elsie, a woman who spends the whole action of the drama cleaning a men's urinal. Elsie sums up her philosophy for the audience: "life is a ball of shit which is never quite cleaned up, but I've tried"¹³⁷ (*Secrets* 5). *Born to Clean*, a musical play conceived by Renée, which toured the country in 1987, has a central theme which challenges the

¹³⁷ Renée has acknowledged the autobiographical element in the creation of this character: "I was really cocking a snook at Theatre Corporate in a way because when I was working there as a cleaner, only a few people said 'Hello' to me as Renée and the rest just saw me as an extension of the vacuum cleaner and stepped over" (McCurdy 67).

propensity of society to cast women in the role of cleaner.

The motif of rape associated with the image of dirt may be seen to be carried through to the novels. Lily develops a similar reaction to rape as the woman in *Secrets*. She solves her phobia of dirt by wearing gloves all the time. The recurring image of woman as cleaner is able to be found in the novels in the person of Flora, who, at the beginning of *Does This Make Sense To You?* is constantly tidying up after her husband and children, even to the extent of cleaning the unsavoury splashes left around the toilet from the effects of her husband having had too much to drink.

Through the manipulation of images that have been transferred from the plays to the novels, therefore, it appears that a debate is taking place concerning how the changing roles of women in New Zealand society should be judged in the 1990s.

The note of optimism sounded through the manipulation of the images of the unfinished dress, the kitchen table, the coffin and the garden is counterbalanced by the note of pessimism sounded in the manipulation of the image of the man with the hammer.

Music as a Reflection of Theme

Just as Renée has used the technique of using music to reflect her themes in the plays, so the same device can be seen to be re-deployed in her prose. In the plays the musical dimension which represents the female voice often challenges patriarchal values. The female theme in *Jeannie Once*, the musical interludes in *Wednesday to Come*, the Sunday school

hymn in *Pass It On*, the romantic ballad in *Belle's Place* and the revue in rehearsal in *Setting the Table*, are all examples of this. In the novels, however, the musical dimension representing the female tends to be conciliatory rather than defiant. One of the key themes that is to be found throughout the novels is to portray the re-defined family unit in one form or another, and to claim that it is a perfectly viable alternative to the traditional nuclear family, and worthy of being inter-related with and accepted by the rest of New Zealand society. For example, in *Willy Nilly* Sonja and Evvie are a lesbian couple who have reared a child. Sonja and Evvie are shown to have a stable, loving, and nurturing relationship.¹³⁸ Their child, Polly, is not only a well adjusted young woman, but she loves both the women who have reared her, and has no difficulty in coming to terms with her upbringing.¹³⁹ In the end she even comes to love her father, Theo, himself a homosexual, whom she meets only a few days before her wedding. Polly's marriage to Luke, a young doctor, shows every sign of

¹³⁸ In 1983 Miriam Saphira ran a survey through *Women's Weekly* in which four percent of women identified themselves as lesbian. From this she estimated that there were about two thousand lesbian mothers with children under sixteen living in New Zealand at that time. In 1984 she wrote a book, *Amazon Mothers*, which was one of the first to deal with the subject of lesbian mothers. In an interview with *Broadsheet* in March 1984 she stated that lesbian mothers were still largely invisible to professional people and to society at large, and that support groups were only just opening up in the large centres (Saphira 97 - 100). In November 1985 Yoka Neuman claimed in a *Broadsheet* article that there was no proven difference between the children reared in lesbian homes and other children (Poulter 21). In March 1987 *Broadsheet* in an article called "Lesbian mothers" reported on the findings of a lesbian research project in which Sue Hanna claimed that the concerns that children may suffer if they were reared in a lesbian household were not soundly based, and that there was no evidence to support the claim that children reared in lesbian households would grow up to be homosexual (Rankine, "Lesbian Families" 5-7).

¹³⁹ A similar assertion is made in "Rarely Pure and Never Simple," a short story written for *Metro* in 1994, which also has a protagonist in a long standing lesbian relationship who has a daughter. Sally, like Polly, is heterosexual, loves the women who have parented her and displays no adverse effects from the nature of her upbringing. She is "an achiever, bright, intelligent...absolutely determined" ("Rarely Pure and Never Simple" 97).

turning out to be a happy one, giving the story a fairy tale happy ending. Although initially there are difficulties for some of the characters, such as Alice, Sonja's mother, and Luke's parents, about accepting the unusual circumstances of Polly's conception, by means of a sperm donor and a meat baster, and to come to terms with the concept of her particular kind of alternative family unit, in the end all qualms are overcome, and everybody comes to accept everybody else and gather together to celebrate the wedding at the end of the novel.

The music of the novels like the thematic concerns of the texts assumes the right for both the homosexual as well as the heterosexual couple to function visibly within society, and so asserts the right of both kinds of people to engage in open courtship rituals.

In *Daisy and Lily*, for example, the place where Daisy is able to relax and fully enjoy herself for the first time as an adult is when she is taken to a lesbian club by Colleen and Connie:

I'd never seen anything like the big barn of a place crammed with women. I gazed around like a child at its first birthday party ... and lots of women were in the middle of the room dancing, some together, some on their own. There were women hugging and kissing quite openly. I tried not to be too obvious but I know I must have goggled (*D&L* 78-79).

This environment, far from mortifying Daisy, transports her into a state of euphoric happiness. The popular ballad and the traditional New Year's Eve celebrations are shown to be the means used by the gay just as much as the straight community to have a right royal good time:

That night I danced and sang and drank wine and danced and sang again. At midnight I joined hands in a big circle and sang 'Auld Lang Syne' with great gusto and later got quite drunk. I remember weaving up Victoria Street singing

*Mexicali Rose stop crying
I'll come back to you some sunny day... (79).*

In this sense the music in the novels reflects the mood of optimism concerning the changing roles of women in New Zealand society from the 1970s onwards, conveyed by much of the imagery in the text. For this open celebration would never have been possible in the climate of the time at which *Belle's Place* was set. In this sense also, the music reflects Renée's assertion, contained within the subtext of the novels, that it is possible for the homosexual community to be inter-related with and to become an acceptable part of New Zealand society. Daisy is not threatened or intimidated when she sings "Mexicali Rose" lustily with her friends in the street. Once again the image of the garden, contained within the lyrics of the song, is associated with a new understanding and growth in personal relationships.

Yet the music of the novels also illustrates vividly, as does the text, the misery that can result when an individual is forced, because of social convention, to assume a role for which they are by force of nature patently unsuited. After her first sexual encounter with Lily, Daisy's conditioning tells her "that was a mistake, dirty" (105). Yet at the same time she knows by instinct that she has married Spenser because she cannot cope with her true feelings for Lily: "It's hard to accept that I once saw Spenser as an escape from Lily, or more accurately my feelings for Lily. I was in love

and I was running scared" (96-97). Lily has a similar reaction and bolts from the situation, placing herself physically out of reach.¹⁴⁰

The music reflects the despair caused by circumstances like these, which is outlined in detail in the text. At Daisy's wedding, after the cutting of the cake, everyone sings in celebration

*Forever and ever
My heart will be true
Sweetheart forever
I'll wait for you* (106).

Rather than making her happy, this just causes Daisy to become more utterly miserable, because she associates the song not with the man who is now her husband but with the partner she really longs to be with.

Viewed in this light, the opening up of the possibility of a vast, beautiful and frontierless space in which all can grow, which is contained within the image of the finished dress, is, in the end, a solution which is much less likely to cause wretchedness in the minority it affects than being bound by social orthodoxy. In this sense the mood of compassion and acceptance for all, which is so prevalent in the text of *Willy Nilly*, is reflected in the music.

At the end of this novel Polly is married in a blue dress. At the

¹⁴⁰ Other works refer, as does this one, to marriages failing because the wife comes to terms with the fact that the lesbian alternative is more suited to her needs. *Breaking Out* ends with Ruth preparing to leave her husband after beginning to bond with the lesbian community. In *Willy Nilly* Sonja has rejected her marriage many years before because of a lesbian affair. *Does This Make Sense To You?* begins with Flora deciding to leave her husband. Though the novel ends with her ready to embark upon a new and independent lifestyle, a good deal of the plot is related to the re-bonding process that takes place when she goes to live in the house of her old friend Ka. In the transition period of making up her mind whether or not she wants to stay in the marriage, Flora suggests at one stage to Ka that they should become lovers. In *The Snowball Waltz* Gertrude's granddaughter Souvie leaves her marriage to go and live with another woman.

ceremony the connotations associated within the symbolism of the dress become attainable for all and this is mirrored in the reaction to the music that is played at the marriage ceremony.

The same song "Sentimental Me," played by Jan and Fern, induces Alice to recall her fierce physical desire for her husband, and Luke to kiss his new bride. But the music brings together not only heterosexual couples. "Some Enchanted Evening," played in the same medley, recalls to Sonja her first courtship of Evvie, her partner of many years, and proves to be the final spur in prodding Sal to make a play for Fern, so opening up the possibility of a new relationship. Thus at the end of *Willy Nilly* Granna's prediction for young Jeannie finally comes true a generation or two later. As such the finished dress in the 1990s has come to represent not only the aspirations of working class women, but of all women, focusing on the lesbian couple in particular, for there is every reason to believe that the marriage of Luke and Polly is destined to serve as a fairy tale happy ending. The novel closes as the wedding day celebrations get under way in the Garden of Eden setting that Evvie has created out of the wilderness. Thus the mythology of the Bible and the fairy tale are linked and re-worked by the writer, to assert that in the 1990s it is possible to rear a happy child in a lesbian household and that the gay family unit is worthy of acceptance and inter-relationship within New Zealand society as a whole.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ The re-working of the fairy tale to suit the lesbian aspiration is to be found in Renée's book of comic writings *Yin and Tonic*. In "A fairy story for baby dykes" the Cinderella myth is once again used, and refers back to Sheila's bitter comment about the "handsome prince" in *Setting the Table* (*Setting the Table* 48), but this time the adapted story has a positive ending. Cindy Ella is happier than the Ugly Sisters, Frankie and Johnny, because

It is interesting to note also that on a similar theme, in “Rarely Pure and Never Simple,” Sally, also reared in a lesbian household, and in many ways like Polly,¹⁴² makes a highly successful dramatic performance of Lady Bracknell wearing “a big, blue picture hat with flowers and feathers, [and] a deeper blue dress” (“Rarely Pure and Never Simple” 96). The finished blue dress thus becomes once again not only a material object but an image which is representative of successful lesbian child rearing. The hat recalls part of one of Uncle Auntie’s ensembles with its “large...picture hat with huge...velvet roses rioting across the brim” (*D&L* 67) which in *Daisy and Lily* is a representation of defiance, drawing attention to the rejection of the solution of secrecy and the demand that the homosexual community be given the right to openly express their sexual preferences.¹⁴³

Renée’s latest novel, *The Snowball Waltz*, ends with Gertrude playing the piano for all her guests:

For now they hurry as Gertrude calls. The sitting room furniture has been pushed against the walls, and as the guests look on expectantly she seats herself at the piano and Daniel picks up his saxophone and stands beside her (*The Snowball Waltz* 184).

she has come out as a lesbian, and they are afraid to. Prince Charming becomes Brickie the basketball star. The Fairy Godmother has had a hip transplant and, like Uncle Auntie, wears a flaming red wig, and Cindy Ella goes to the Ball in a white tuxedo drinking Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc. Everybody is reconciled at the end and the fairy tale happy ending is adapted to “And they all loved happily ever after” (*Y&T* 119).

¹⁴² It is worth noting also, that throughout Renée’s oeuvre, the child reared outside the nuclear family unit in a non-traditional household proves to be very stable and successful. The schoolgirl protagonists in *Finding Ruth* and *I Have To Go Home*, along with Ellen in *Groundwork*, Barney in *Jeannie Once*, and Anna, Souvie and Mem in *The Snowball Waltz*, are all additional examples of this.

¹⁴³ Renée indicates in an interview with Claire-Louise McCurdy that she associates the colour blue with Auckland, the place where she first blossomed as a creative artist: “I liked Auckland – I liked the blue – the agapanthus and the jacaranda” (McCurdy 64). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why she associates the colour with a vast and limitless space.

Music played to include all reflects the central theme of a cry for acceptance for all that pervades Renée's oeuvre.

Granna's Riddle: The Link with the Past and the Aspiration for the Future

It can be argued that, amidst all the variety of techniques by which Renée has expressed her point of view of the changing roles of women in New Zealand society, in the end the crux of her philosophy is encapsulated in the compound image of the dinner party. Chapter Two discussed how the image of the unfinished dress was associated with the image of the table and the meal in preparation, to voice the aspiration that at some time in the future a full meal would be prepared, where all could sit at table, and afterwards conclude the festivities in a dance with the partners of their choice. This image becomes the vehicle by which Renée claims the right of the re-defined family unit to become inter-related with the rest of New Zealand society. Like the unfinished dress, this compound image provides both the link with the past and the aspiration for the future for the continuum of female experience.

Even in the 1990s this aspiration has still not been fully achieved. Although all the novels contain images of food being served to bond together the re-defined family unit, in none of them is a full meal prepared and served at table for all. The tone of optimism however, that has already been identified to be characteristic of the novels, makes the mood of Renée's prose quite different from that of the plays. The closure of the

novels in a mood of expectancy, in contrast to the plays, which tend to culminate at best in compromise, leaves the reader with the impression that the aspiration contained within the image of the dinner party is on the cusp of attainment. This is in itself a further indication that Renée has come to regard the 1990s as a progressive time for women in New Zealand society, and that, despite the difficulties, it may also be a turning point.

Key indications of this are to be found in her latest novel *The Snowball Waltz*, where the setting has moved from the city to the rural settlement of Porohiwi. In this small town is a café called A Rose Is A Rose Is A Rose, run by lesbians¹⁴⁴ and always full, because the food is so good. The linking of the name with the garden image is perhaps indicative of a new growth or flowering within a community, which now, despite a

¹⁴⁴ This quotation from Gertrude Stein first appeared in a poem she wrote called "Sacred Emily." Gertrude Stein was a writer and critic, an American who inherited a family fortune which allowed her to live comfortably in Paris from the early 1900s until after the Second World War. She was famous for her collection of modern art, including works by Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne. She befriended these artists, along with others in their circle, before their success as artists was established. By the outbreak of the First World War she and her brothers had acquired the most important collection of modern art in the world. During the 1920s and 30s she encouraged a group of young writers who had come to Paris, among them F.Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Thus she came to be at the centre of a group of writers and artists whose works were among the most important of this century (Souhami 11-14).

On Sunday 8 September 1907 Gertrude Stein met Alice B. Toklas in Paris.

Alice heard bells ringing in her head when she saw Gertrude and thought that was proof she was in the presence of a genius...On Gertrude's suggestion they walked alone together the next day in the Luxembourg Gardens and ate cakes in a patisserie off the Boulevard St Michel. From then on, until Gertrude's death thirty-nine years later, they were never apart. They never travelled without each other, or entertained separately, or worked on independent projects. Gertrude felt low in her mind if she was away from Alice for long. And Alice, writing about their relationship, at the end of her own long life, said that from the moment they met, 'it was Gertrude Stein who held my complete attention, as she did for all the many years I knew her until her death, and all those empty ones since then' (12).

Gertrude and Alice regarded themselves as married and lived openly together throughout their relationship. It was Alice who chose their motto 'Rose is a rose is a rose' which appeared in a circle on Gertrude's stationery (15). Gertrude Stein's quotation appears also in *Setting the Table* (STT 25) where it is again associated with the lesbian relationship.

traditionally conservative rural setting, appears to be coming to accept a minority group it would once have rejected. Renée also observes within the novel, “There’s many Porohiwis” (*TSW* 113), so underscoring her contention that it is not only the urban communities, which provide the setting for her three other novels, but also the rural communities, which are coming to accept the re-defined family unit and the homosocial individuals that make it up. So in *The Snowball Waltz*, we are left with the impression that the rope is about to be removed from the stage that is the society of rural New Zealand.

It is true that the backlash against acceptance is not only still there but now exists in an even more violent form. The rope that is the symbol of the division between the homosexual and the heterosexual community in *Belle’s Place* appears again in this novel, this time in the horrific image of the ghost of the severed head of Resa, attached by a rope to her surviving partner Souvie. Resa has been the victim of non-acceptance. The local priest has convinced her that her relationship with Souvie is a sin, and she has killed herself. Thus the rope of division which is the symbol of schism between the gay community and the heterosexual majority in *Belle’s Place* has become representative of the schism between the gay community and the institutions which actively refuse to condone it, such as the Catholic church, a schism which may result in tragedy.

An environment of adversity and pain, often accompanied by the motif of suicide, is the norm for the female in the work of Renée, yet in this novel, the aspiration of Jeannie, voiced in the play set in 1879, finally comes to fruition. The man with the hammer does not always win. After

trying to destroy Gertrude's nursery, Affy Jingle attempts to set fire to her property, and in doing so ends up destroying himself. The renewed optimism contained within this image reveals that not only does the negative force of the man with the hammer, or the offstage male threat, which Affy embodies, eventually self destruct, but that even a negative force can provide a catalyst for new growth in relationships.

For the death of Affy prompts the community to reassess its relationship to Gertrude. They come to her nursery in flocks to buy plants, "and assure her they had nothing to do with Affy Jingle, never held with all that rubbish in the paper, that Porohiwi wouldn't be the same without Gertrude and her plants" (*TSW* 180). The association with the garden image indicates not only new growth in the relationship between Gertrude and her community. Renée has always been particularly condemning of the destructive effects of the system of Law and Order on female aspiration.¹⁴⁵ In the same nursery setting

the young policeman tactfully took Gertrude to task about not informing them right from the start when Affy first knocked her over. Gertrude's conviction that they'd have taken absolutely no notice because they don't usually take any notice of her complaints was met with an incredulous stare.

Even though Gertrude is still sceptical that the policeman is naïve because he is "Just out of Police School," and she assumes that "He'll learn" (181)

¹⁴⁵ Renée acknowledges that one of the results of being involved in active political protest is that she has developed a fear of the police. By 1981, in the process of protesting against the Springbok Tour, she had become "frightened of what I knew they could do" (McCurdy 65). A salient characteristic of her oeuvre has been her negative portrayal of the police force, which is often represented as being the embodiment of the metaphor of the man with the hammer. *Setting the Table*, *Wednesday To Come*, *Groundwork*, *Pass It On*, *Jeannie Once*, *Missionary Position*, *Tiggy Tiggy Touch Wood* and *Daisy and Lily* all have strong elements which portray the system of law and order actively working against the interests of the women who are placed central to the plot.

to adopt the same attitude as many of his peers, yet there is hope perhaps, in this latest work, that even the police, who have been portrayed as such a negative force throughout her work, may also be in the process of re-thinking their position, or that the new generation of them may be better.

The overall mood of the novels as a whole, therefore, is not only cautiously optimistic, it is also expectant in the sense that the reader comes to anticipate that aspirations are on the threshold of fulfilment. Although the compound image of the dinner party is never fully achieved in any of the novels, it is prefigured in the endings of *Willy Nilly* and *The Snowball Waltz*, and the novels as a whole each contain jigsaw pieces of fulfilment which relate to the central compound image. Polly is married in a blue dress. Flora and Ka are served a full meal. Daisy ends up with the partner of her choice. And *The Snowball Waltz* ends with the commencement of the dance of the same name, which is designed to include everybody, and in the novel provides the central symbol for community:

The Snowball Waltz. The music starts, two people invited by the Master (or in this case, Mistress) of Ceremonies begin to waltz. When the music stops they separate and seek other partners from those sitting or standing around the edge of the dance floor. No one invited to dance may refuse, although when the music next stops, a dancer may leave the floor and not extend the invitation to dance to anyone else. They may not dance again in this particular Snowball Waltz.

The pattern of music, dance, silence, separation, music, dance, silence, separation, is repeated until all the people in the room are up and waltzing. The Snowball Waltz then continues with the same partners until the music stops, the dance ends, and the dancers go their separate ways (Preface, *TSW*)

And yet Renée's view of history remains essentially cyclical. The 1990s may be a time of progression for women in her view, but that does

not ensure that at some time in the future a regressive movement may not recur. In the end it is Granna in *Wednesday to Come* who sums up the key to Renée's philosophy. It is Granna, in the reading of the tea leaves, who has the last word on the aspiration contained in the compound image of the dinner party. Despite the fluctuating fortunes of the tailoring of the blue dress, the preparation of the dinner, and the commencement of the dance, which are all subject to the vagaries of the cycles of history, the heart of the matter lies in the deepest recesses of Granna's riddle: "Now, now, there's something in the bottom of the cup. Something that is lost will be found – in the midst of fear and pain – but as soon as you touch it you'll be safe" (*WTC* 35).

In relation to this we might examine what each of Renée's strong women protagonists reveal in their lives which may unravel the riddle. Despite forces outside their control, like poverty, political unrest, prejudice against them or other forms of adversity, they are all survivors.¹⁴⁶ Despite the vagaries of fortune, and despite the actions of some males, acting either individually or collectively to try to thwart their aspirations, they all find a niche for themselves.

The plays tend to end in frustration of some kind, for often the outside social and economic forces have a significantly curtailing effect on the aspirations of the women placed centre stage. The novels, on the other hand, all end in a mood of optimism with their protagonists on the cusp of

¹⁴⁶ Renée has made clear her admiration of the working class women that are central to her work: "I see them as heroes because they seem to survive under great odds" (*Warrington* 76).

an aspiration suited to their individual needs. Sonja is about to integrate her extended family even more closely, Daisy is at last beginning to realise some kind of physical relationship with Lily, Flora is on the brink of a new and more independent lifestyle, and Gertrude is finally being accepted by the community that has shunned her for most of her life because she is of German descent.

Apart from their strength of will, and a tendency towards rebellion, perhaps, in the end the most significant characteristic of the lives of all this diverse series of women is that they have succeeded in finding love in their lives in one form or another. In Granna's words they have all "found – in the midst of fear and pain" a panacea that gives them the will to carry on.

It could be that the solution to Granna's riddle in the plays is answered by Daisy in the novels:

I believe in love. That is my crutch. In spite of all evidence to the contrary I believe it's the most important thing in the world. In the here and now. Just plain, ordinary old love. Except that it is never either plain or ordinary and that most times the reason for its existence is incomprehensible to everyone but the people themselves (*D&L* 43).

It is this belief that lies at the heart of Renée's philosophy (Renée, personal interview 1 August 1997). Perhaps at bedrock it is simply that which lies at the bottom of the cup which gives Renée's female leaders, and their author, their strength. And Daisy's statement, in keeping with the mood of the novels, is, in the end, all-inclusive.

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