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METAMORPHOSIS AT 'THE MARGIN':
BRUCE MASON, JAMES K. BAXTER, MERVYN
THOMPSON, RENÉE AND ROBERT LORD, FIVE
PLAYWRIGHTS WHO HAVE HELPED TO CHANGE
THE FACE OF NEW ZEALAND DRAMA.

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather and my mother, neither of whom had the privilege of gaining the education that they both so much deserved. I stand on their shoulders, just as my son, David, will stand on mine. The writing of this thesis, however, would not have been possible without the unstinting assistance of Ainslie Hewton. Finally, to my irreplaceable friend, Zeb, the puppy I wanted and never had as a child. Zeb nurtured me throughout this long project and then, in the last week of completion, was called by the black rabbit. Thank you for everything you taught me Zebedee. You and I will always be playing alongside your beloved riverbank.

ABSTRACT

Drama has been the slowest of the arts to develop an authentic New Zealand ‘voice.’ This thesis focuses on the work of five playwrights: Bruce Mason, James K. Baxter, Mervyn Thompson, Renée and Robert Lord, all of whom have set out to identify such a ‘voice’ and in so doing have brought about a metamorphosis in the nature of New Zealand drama.

New Zealand has traditionally been regarded as being on ‘the margin’ in relation to the dominant culture of the colonizer (the Eurocentre). Before Bruce Mason began to challenge this ‘centre’ of power in the early 1950s, New Zealand playwrights were so intimidated by the Eurocentre that they usually set their plays in Europe, particularly in England, in order to make them acceptable to their audiences. Mason proposed that ‘the margin’ of New Zealand, rather than being seen as inferior, should be re-defined as a fertile place capable of nurturing a new individual dramatic form quite distinct from colonial norms.

All of my chosen playwrights have insisted upon the intrinsic value of a two-tiered concept of ‘the margin.’ By setting their plays (wherever possible) in the country of their birth, highlighting New Zealand social issues and in the process persuading theatre-going audiences that plays about this country are worth watching, they have given new life to ‘the margin’ (the culture of New Zealand as a whole).

At the same time all of these five playwrights have recognized that minority groups – ‘voices’ from ‘the outer margin’ in relation to the Pakeha ‘inner margin’ of power – have been largely unrepresented or misrepresented in New Zealand plays. They have advocated the vital importance of women’s ‘voices,’ Māori ‘voices’ and gay ‘voices,’ for example, in their exploration of a more sophisticated and inclusive understanding of what constitutes our national identity. Moreover, in a period of less than forty years, they have helped to facilitate the transition of New Zealand theatre from amateur to professional status and have been instrumental in providing the practical framework whereby future New Zealand playwrights may find an outlet for their work.

July 2006

PREFACE

The date which appears in brackets after the first reference to the title of a stage play is the year of the play's first production in New Zealand.

If the play was originally written for radio or television then the date which appears in brackets after the first mention of the play is the year of the play's first broadcast by BCNZ (known until 1978 as NZBC) or TVNZ.

The year of a play's first performance (which appears in brackets in the text) may not be the same as the date on the script which has been used in this research (which is recorded in the bibliography).

If the play has not been performed in New Zealand then the date which appears in brackets after the first mention of the title is the date, if there is one, on the script used for this research. Brief details of the location of the script are also included in these brackets. These details are expanded in the bibliography.

This thesis confines itself to plays which have been performed in New Zealand. Overseas productions of these plays are referred to only in passing where this is relevant.

The dialogue and stage directions in a script are reproduced in the same format as the one to be found in the script which has been used for this research.

The titles of articles and reviews are reproduced in grammatically correct format. For example 'act features first return' becomes 'Act features "First Return."

Anthologized titles are placed in single quotation marks.

Quotations are accompanied by single quotation marks.

Square brackets are placed around my ellipsis points.

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<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
<u>Chapter 1: Bruce Mason: The Boy In The Flaxbush</u>	31
A: The Lessons Of The Flaxbush	
1. Introduction	31
2. The Story Of Beauty And The Beast	40
B: Manifestations Of ‘The Beast’	
1. The Mad Beast	45
2. The Brown Beast	53
3. The Sexual Beast	71
C: Conclusion	88
<u>Chapter 2: James K. Baxter: The Boy In The Cave</u>	93
A: Introduction	93
B: The Poetic Cave	98
C: The Dramatic Cave	104
D: ‘Man Alone’ On The Landscape	122
E: Conclusion	140
<u>Chapter 3: Mervyn Thompson: The Boy Whose Roof</u>	
<u>Blew Off</u>	143
A: ‘I Know At Last Whose I Am, What I Belong To, What I Must Do’	
1. Introduction	143
2. The Thompson Holocaust	150
B: ‘O Blacktown, Blacktown ... I Grew Up In You, And In Your Face ... I Saw The Face Of The World’	168
C: At The ‘Sacrificial Shrines’	185
D: Conclusion	199

<u>Chapter 4: Renée: The Girl Whose Mother Weeded</u>	
<u>Carrots For Sixpence An Hour</u>	204
A: ‘It’s Not What You Want, It’s What You Get’	
1. Introduction	204
2. ‘It’s Asking And Getting No For An Answer’	214
B: ‘Setting The Table’	231
C: ‘A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far’	247
D: Conclusion	256
<u>Chapter 5: Robert Lord: The Boy Well Hung</u>	262
A: ‘[T]he Grass Isn’t Green. The Land Is Brown. [. . .] Time Made The Ground Drier. Time.’	
1 Introduction	262
2 The ‘ <i>Dirty Mark</i> ’ On The Tablecloth	268
B: ‘Had More Fun Than A Barrel Full Of Monkeys. [. . .] “Variety Is The Spice Of Life.”’	287
C: ‘If I Observe Myself Closely I Can See Myself Living. [. . .] I Can Climb Right Out Of My Body, Sit Somewhere Else, And Watch Myself Sweat.’	299
D: Conclusion	312
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	314
<u>WORKS CITED</u>	326
A: Primary Sources	326
B: Secondary Sources	339
<u>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	353