

**Ethics and the evolution of theatre in Aotearoa – a response to the Creative New Zealand Theatre Review**  
**By Stephen Bain**

Auckland-based academic Melissa Laing recently published her research on performance ethics through the University Without Conditions. In this insightful study it becomes clear what performing artists and curators understand by ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the audio discussions have to do with free will, the imposition of the will of the performer onto the audience and visa versa. This is a good snapshot of how this diverse group of artists understand as the core ethical values of their work.

What remains largely unsaid are the ethics of maintaining a business within the economic system we live and work within. We suppress these ethical questions because we know we have no power to enact our own will. As philosopher Alain Badiou puts it “we see liberal capitalism... as the only natural and acceptable solution. Every revolutionary idea is considered utopian and ultimately criminal.”<sup>2</sup>

What it suggests is, either we have TWO value systems that we consider are totally incompatible and unaffected by each other, OR we have one pervasive system that is immovable and irrefutable and therefore irrelevant to our own values.

Either way, CNZ theatre review embodies this conundrum perfectly.

The CNZ Theatre Review document perfectly positions itself as a worthy institution that very effectively evaluates it's worth within a fiscally dominant political doctrine. The value of culture/art is not only quantified, it is at great length reinterpreted to adhere to the current fiscal system.

This is what is referred to in Western philosophy as ‘the financialisation of everything’.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, in recent weeks we have observed through the Greek financial crises how ‘Neoliberalism is the enemy of Democracy’.<sup>4</sup> As a fast adopter of this new kind of capitalism, the New Zealand government have successfully instilled not only a rhetoric but also a profound value system that Creative New Zealand now excels in.

This cultural institution now sets a closely aligned agenda for the delivery and development of culture and then set about a competition-based process to employ ‘clients’ to fulfill those outcomes.

This sets up a power balance whereby each ‘client’ justifies and quantifies their value to an homogenized set of criteria, but more importantly we see the delivery of cultural projects that are conceived and designed in order to fulfill that political agenda.

Anecdotally we are seeing a reductive approach to culture through the narrowing lens of a singular financial system. We see it in local television<sup>5</sup>, radio, journalism and most surely in the performing arts.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://universitywithoutconditions.ac.nz>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sok.bz/web/media/video/ABriefHistoryNeoliberalism.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/19990401.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://brianedwardsmedia.co.nz/2015/04/the-campbell-live-debate-a-considered-view/>

The diversity of culture cannot be effectively addressed when a dominant political system is filtering the distribution of resources. What historically we end up with is a lot of very highly polished art where the big questions are never addressed for fear of being denied resources or expelled from the political system altogether.

This is precisely where theatre in New Zealand is at in 2015.

Our cultural institutions create politically benign work with high-production values and screes of evaluative documents to justify their ongoing existence.

Where in the theatre review document is the discussion about what drives culture? What are the big questions in the evolution of culture? Where is acceptance of different viewpoints outside the financially rigid political agenda? Where is the interest to go beyond the bureaucratic self-guarding agenda? Why are there no clear and complex cultural indicators?

I have on several occasions spoken with NZ artists who have confessed that 'when I see the CNZ logo on something [a flyer, a book, a poster, a cd] I know that it's going to be rubbish'. What do they mean by this? Because surely the 'quality' and 'excellence' have been systematically qualified?

The narrowing of a political agenda is always a restriction on the diversity of cultural expression. 'Rubbish' in this case means work that is not politically astute, it is not socially conscious, or diverse in its representation and most importantly it conforms to a pre-ordained agenda. Perhaps it's a little like the 100% Pure logo in that what it means and what it represents are two different things.<sup>6</sup>

What we find, more and more, is a guarded use of fiscal language while we shield our true ethical value system from view. This is not uncommon in any oppressive system, people have a remarkable schizophrenic ability to adopt agendas that they do not believe, whilst guarding their own values.

#### To the Nitty-Gritty

This Theatre Review must be rewritten at once.

It must represent the values of what we actually believe affect and inform the evolution of culture.

It must view with suspicion any agenda of exclusion.

It must view with suspicion all organisations that align themselves to an unethical system and encourage a true commitment to the evolution of culture.

It must abandon the empty rhetoric of marketing and begin to adopt an outward seeking redefinition of how culture is expressed.

It must abandon all capitalist principles with regards to the delivery of culture to it's population.

As a cultural worker for the past 27 years, I have come into contact with most, if not quite all of the CNZ 'client organisations'. There is a common adopting of exploitative practice in each and every one of them.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/8023412/100-Pure-Fantasy-Living-up-to-our-brand>

How many of these 'Investment Organisations' pay 6 figure salaries to its directors who then present work where the artists onstage are paid below the minimum wage, through the cynical guise of internships, or work experience?<sup>7</sup>

How many 'Totara and Kahikatea' organisations use the income of UNPAID artists to represent their organisations income to offset their infrastructure funding?

If we are committed to cultural diversity, why have the resources for independent grants more than halved in value in the past 5 years? And how can large organisations in 'leadership roles' possibly resist the temptation to pay lip-service to such roles by creating their own 'brand' of self-invigorating cultural diversity rather than seeking out the diversity that exists?

These have become acceptable practice in a Capitalism system where the skilled cultural leader is one who can justify this exploitation to the political regime that funds it, whilst safeguarding their own ethical stand in silence.

These are the ethics of performing arts funding that are of far greater importance than any of the strategies laid out in the Creative NZ Theatre Review.

CNZ has an obligation to the people of New Zealand to faithfully depict a performing arts practice that is in crisis. While the logos and business plans have never looked shinier, the complexity and depth of cultural and intellectual life in NZ has never looked so poor.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.atc.co.nz/internships>  
<https://courtheatre.org.nz/company/employment>