

Laughter through tears

The art of serious comedy

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Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion.

– Robert Harling, *Steel Magnolias* (69)

Abstract Title: “Laughter through tears: the art of serious comedy”

Abstract (280 words):

The Deerstalkers’ Ball is a play about a world in transition. It is an observation of the changes that have taken place in New Zealand’s rural south over the past twenty years, largely as a result of the increasing dominance of the dairying industry. The main narrative is set over two months in 1993 and tells the story of a sheep-farming family who will eventually be ‘displaced’ by the new order. It is set against the backdrop of preparations for a ball – a tradition that will soon be consigned to the past.

While there are serious themes at the heart of the play, its overall tone is intended to be comic. Indeed, the most significant challenge in writing the play was achieving a successful balance between comedy and pathos. The exegesis in this thesis focuses principally on this issue, using the development of *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* as an opportunity to explore the sub-genre of what might be called ‘serious comedy’ – an approach typified by Ivan Turgenev’s *A Month in the Country*, Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* and plays by writers who have followed in their footsteps.

The exegesis sets out to identify and define the characteristics and techniques of serious comedy. In addition to this investigation of tone, it looks at the use of multiple timeframes to make a story set in the recent past relevant to a contemporary audience and the opportunity this creates to balance comedy with pathos. The exegesis also discusses the elliptical nature of dramatic dialogue and the value of understatement in creating comic and dramatic effects and provides an extended discussion of the social and political background and themes of *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*.

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Lyrics from "Soliloquy" used with permission

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The Deerstalkers' Ball

A comedy in two acts

A play script

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Theatre Studies)

at the

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by

Michael Metzger

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Playwright's note

The play is set in rural Otago, New Zealand. The main story takes place over two months in winter 1993. Sheep farming is in a slump. Increasingly, farms are being converted to dairy or sold to dairy farmers moving in from 'up north'.

Acts and Scenes**Act 1**

Scene 1	Saturday 1 June 2013. Late afternoon.
Scene 2	Saturday 10 April 1993. Morning.
Scene 3	Later that morning.
Scene 4	Saturday 17 April 1993. Early afternoon.
Scene 5	A few days later. Early evening.
Scene 6	Saturday 24 April 1993. Afternoon.
Scene 7	Saturday 1 May 1993. Early morning

Act 2

Scene 8	Saturday 5 June 1993. Early evening.
Scene 9	A few days later. Afternoon.
Scene 10	Later that afternoon.
Scene 11	Saturday 19 June 1993. Late afternoon.
Scene 12	Later that evening / Saturday 1 June 2013. Late afternoon.

Cast

(In order of appearance)

Vicki Tarawhiti	Born early 1960s.
Gore Rodgers	Born mid-1940s. American.
Jack Tarawhiti	Vicki's son. Born early 1994.
Josh Rodgers	Gore's nephew. Born 1974. American.
John Gordon	Gore's partner and Vicki's uncle. Born mid-1930s.
Cotton Tarawhiti	Vicki's husband. Born early-1950s. Māori.
Victoria Gordon (Gran)	John's mother and Vicki's maternal grandmother. Born about 1915.

Note: It is intended that the same actor plays Jack and Josh.

ACT I

SCENE 1

*1 June 2013. Farmhouse living room.
The stage is bare except for a pile of
cartons and a mounted stag's head
hanging on the wall.*

Vicki is mopping the floor. Jack is loading cartons. Gore doesn't attempt to help the others during the scene.

GORE

Gypsy day.¹ I feel like a gypsy. So many boxes. How are we going to fit them all in?

Jack picks up a carton.

JACK

The movers left all this stuff because you wouldn't let them take it.

GORE

There were things I needed.

JACK

You were too busy flirting to notice.

GORE

That beautiful Māori boy. I didn't want him to strain any of those gorgeous muscles lifting heavy boxes.

JACK

You don't seem bothered about *me* straining anything.

He exits with the carton.

GORE

He reminded me of Cotton.

Vicki doesn't react.

I guess we'd better hurry. It's getting dark already.

Jack enters.

¹ 'Gypsy day' (1 June) marks the beginning of the new dairy season. It is the day farms change hands and sharemilkers take up new contracts.

JACK

He had to be, like, at least 40.

GORE

It's all relative. When you get to my age, 'youth' is a very broad category.

JACK

You're an old sleaze.

GORE

Absolutely. I'm going to have a pool boy, and a house boy and a personal trainer. The land of milk and honey.

JACK

Cane toads and snakes, more like it.

GORE

You're just jealous because you'll be holed up in some backwater where it snows nine months of the year.

JACK

Like you chose to come here for the climate.

Jack exits with another carton.

GORE

I don't see why you have to hightail it clear across the planet. Was it something I said?

Vicki doesn't look up from mopping.

VICKI

I never did my OE. Now's my chance.

Gore watches her for a while.

GORE

I wouldn't get too carried away. You've seen the shacks they live in. I doubt they'll even take off their boots.

Jack enters.

There'll be cow shit everywhere.

JACK

From asshole to breakfast.

VICKI

That's a terrible expression.

JACK

Gran taught me that when I was about four.

(a beat)

She was great.

VICKI

Yes. Yes, she was.

Pause.

Before I forget, would you bring in the casserole from the car?

JACK

I don't see why you had to make them dinner.

VICKI

The country may have changed, but there's still a country way of doing things.

GORE

You'll never get the dish back.

VICKI

I think we can afford a casserole.

GORE

We've done the right thing, Vicki.

VICKI

Well, it's too late now.

Jack glances at Gore then beats a hasty exit with another carton.

GORE

We always said we'd give the boy the chance. And we did. That's something to be proud of. Lord knows, farming sheep isn't everyone's idea of a life. You lamb them, tail them, crutch them, slit their throats. When you think about it, there's a lot of blood and faeces.

VICKI

I know.

GORE

He's got a brain. He should use it.

VICKI

Brainless, is it? What we've been doing for the past 20 years.

GORE

You know what I mean.

Jack enters carrying the casserole. He crosses the stage in the direction of the kitchen.

VICKI

Not in there. The floor's still wet. Just put it in the hall for now.

Jack does. He will return for another carton and exit.

GORE

I feel okay, you know. I didn't know that I would, but I do. It was always John's home, anyway. Oh, I fuffed about doing my thing. John wouldn't have known chintz from china.

VICKI

I went for a walk this morning. Seeing the kennels [empty] ...

GORE

I know.

VICKI

Every inch so familiar. Every stone...

GORE

It hardly seems real.

VICKI

Every fence post.

GORE

Every rotten one.

VICKI

The rail gave way. You ended up in the trough.

GORE

Hilarious.

VICKI

We never set out to be farmers. Either of us.

GORE

It doesn't feel right to be sad. Even after the debts are paid, it's an obscene amount of money.

VICKI

We've talked it through. Endlessly.

GORE

I guess it's academic. We couldn't afford to keep going, even if we wanted to.

VICKI

Even so, I'm glad Uncle John's not here to see it go under the hammer.

GORE

It wasn't what he had in mind. We always thought you and Cotton...

(he stops himself)

But there you go. I guess you can only plan ahead so much.

Jack enters.

VICKI

Planning is like hoping. It doesn't get you very far.

JACK

I was planned though, wasn't I? I like the idea that I'm an IVF kid. It kind of makes me a pioneer.

GORE

Don't flatter yourself. They've been doing it to farm animals since Adam was a cowboy.

VICKI

It's different. IVF is different.

GORE

Spare me the lesson in human reproduction. The thought of it makes me squeamish.

JACK

It would have been cheaper to use a turkey baster.

VICKI

Jack!

GORE

Poor cows. Never get within a bull's roar. Just some vet sticking a straw up their behind.

VICKI

You're as bad as each other.

The spit and image.

GORE

(warning)

Gore.

VICKI

Well, he could be. I'm very proud.

GORE

I'd like to meet him, you know.

JACK

I thought you were loading boxes.

VICKI

Keep your hair on.

JACK

I need to finish this floor. They could be here any minute.

VICKI

Jack exits with another carton.

You're going to have to tell him eventually.

GORE

I don't see why.

VICKI

The truth has a way of rising to the surface.

GORE

He's happy enough with the way things are.

VICKI

Jack enters.

JACK

I never understood why he didn't stick around. Like, he wanted me, right? Why leave just as I was about to make my big entrance?

Here. Take this last one.

VICKI

Gore spots the stag's head.

GORE
 Good grief. How did we miss that?

JACK
 I'll get a ladder.

VICKI
 Leave it. I've always hated it. Let the new people have it.

JACK
 There's a car coming up the drive.

VICKI
 They're here.

Vicki and Gore look at each other, not knowing what to do.

JACK
 I'll go and meet them, shall I?

VICKI
 Thanks.

Jack exits.

GORE
 We've ended up on the wrong side of history, haven't we?

VICKI
 I guess we have.

Long pause.

GORE
 It's a huge room. Now that it's empty and the rugs are up. It's like a ballroom.

VICKI
 What's going to happen to our little family?

GORE
 It'll work out.

VICKI
 I'm going to miss all this. Uncle John. Gran. It's like we're leaving them behind.

Gore changes tack.

GORE
 Remember how we danced at the ball?

It seems such a long time ago.

VICKI

Do you remember our song?

GORE

Gore sings a few lines from a dance hall classic from the 1940s or 1950s.

VICKI

I used to love that song. It's years since I heard it.

Gore takes the mop from Vicki.

GORE

Excuse me. May I cut in?

VICKI

(amused)
You silly old goat.

They dance. Gore sings another couple of lines and then hums the tune.

VICKI

We should go.

GORE

Yes, we should.

VICKI

Does the place look okay?

GORE

You've almost worn the polish off the floor.

They stop dancing.

VICKI

Do you want to...[have a minute alone]?

GORE

Goodness me, no. It's an adventure.

VICKI

That's it then.

GORE

That's all she wrote.

I forgot the casserole.

VICKI

She exits. Gore picks up the mop and dances a few steps with it. He stops and takes a last look around the living room.

SCENE 2 - THEN

10 April 1993. JOHN and GORE'S living room.

Josh is rummaging through a sideboard looking for something. John enters with a .22 rifle and aims it at Josh's back.

Don't move.

JOHN

John?

JOSH

Do I know you?

JOHN

I'm Josh.

JOSH

Josh?

JOHN

He recognises Gore's nephew but doesn't lower the gun.

What are you doing?

JOSH

Looking for bus fare.

JOHN

It's Easter. There are no buses.

JOSH

I'm not staying.

JOHN

You've come the length of the country to steal bus money?

JOSH

Can you stop pointing that at me?

Gore enters.

GORE

John, I don't care how old he is, if you have to point a gun at him, it's not legal.

John lowers the gun.

JOSH

Uncle Gore?

GORE

Josh? Well, this is a surprise. Aren't you supposed to be in Auckland?

He hugs Josh.

Heavens to Betsy! You look like you've been dragged through a bush backwards.

JOSH

I slept rough.

GORE

How did you get here?

JOSH

I hitched.

GORE

You hitched? So did I! The first time. Didn't I, John? Little did I know when that handsome stranger stopped and said "Where are you heading?" that I'd be heading right on over to his place.

JOSH

I should go.

GORE

You only just got here. We have so much to talk about. But first you're going to get out of those filthy clothes. Have you got something dry to put on?

JOSH

I left my bag in the hall.

GORE

Well, you can't stand around all day in dirty clothes. Go take a shower. The bathroom's on the right.

JOSH

I don't want to be a bother.

GORE

It's no bother.

Thanks.

JOSH

Josh exits. Gore calls after him.

GORE

And don't worry. I'm not going to call your Mom. Yet.

JOHN

I'll go and help him, shall I?

GORE

You stay where you are. He's family.

JOHN

He's not my family.

GORE

He *is* rather handsome. Remind you of anyone?

JOHN

Reminds me how old I am.

GORE

To me, you'll always be that gorgeous man in a pickup. Now put that gun away before you do some damage.

JOHN

I thought I might see if I could get a rabbit.

GORE

You'll do no such thing. It's cold out. Besides, we've got a meeting.

JOHN

I still don't see why Cotton and I have to join the committee.

GORE

Your mother needs you. I need you.

JOHN

We're already on the organising committee. It's a bit rich being stuck with the catering as well.

GORE

One death and one defection. To the Presbyterians. I don't know which one upset Gran more.

JOHN

You three can handle the supper. You do most of it anyway.

GORE

Your mother's not getting any younger.

JOHN

Maybe it's time Vicki took over.

GORE

She'd have to take Gran out first.

JOHN

You could have a word with Mother.

GORE

It's taken me most of the past 25 years to find her good side, let alone get on it. I'm not going to put that in jeopardy.

JOHN

You two are thick as thieves.

GORE

Over the years I've learned to share her point of view.

JOHN

We'll I can't go. Someone has to stay here and keep an eye on junior. Make sure he doesn't take off with the family silver.

GORE

You don't have any family silver.

JOHN

I'm not leaving him here. I don't trust him.

GORE

He's fine.

JOHN

I caught him red-handed. Said he was looking for bus money.

GORE

He panicked. Goodness knows he's never met us. He probably had second thoughts about showing up unannounced.

JOHN

He'll have to come with us.

GORE

A meeting of the catering committee of the AAW? I'm sure he'll be riveted.²

JOHN

I don't know what Mother will make of him.

GORE

It'll be fine. Just don't introduce him as a thief and a vagrant.

² AAW – Anglican Association of Women.

JOHN

I wonder what he's doing here.

GORE

Visiting his favourite uncle. They can't stay away from Auntie Mame.

JOHN

I don't have a good feeling.

GORE

For goodness sake. Leave him to me. He's 19. It's girl trouble or boy trouble. Either way, we'll patch him up and send him on his way.

JOHN

You better see to it quickly.

GORE

(ignoring him)

And Easter was turning out to be so deathly dull. If I'd known he was coming, I'd have bought him an egg.

SFX: The hall clock strikes the half hour.

Oh my goodness! Why didn't you tell me that was the time? I'd better get ready.

(as he exits)

Lock that gun away. And get that boy out of the shower!

JOHN

Out of the shower. Righto.

GORE

(off)

Behave!

John exits.

SCENE 3 – THEN

Later that same morning. A meeting room at the town hall.

Gran enters carrying a clipboard. She goes over to the 'sideboard' and opens the cupboards, looking for something.

GRAN

(Calls offstage.)

Cotton! Cotton? Do you know where the decorations went? They should be in one of these cupboards.

Vicki and Cotton enter carrying a table. They are not speaking.

I'm glad you two are here on time. I wonder where they are.

Cotton exits.

GRAN

(to Vicki)

What's up with you this morning?

VICKI

It's nothing, Gran.

GRAN

You've got a face like a smacked bottom.

VICKI

It's the cold. It makes my cheeks rosy.

GRAN

You think you're funny.

VICKI

Let me finish setting up and I'll help you look.

GRAN

They must be here somewhere.

Gran exits. Cotton returns with a stack of chairs which he and Vicki arrange around the table. After a silence.

VICKI

Well, then?

COTTON

We've been over this.

VICKI

We're missing the boat.

COTTON

It's John's farm, Vic. He's not interested. End of story.

VICKI

One day it will be ours.

COTTON

That would be something.

VICKI

So we sit around and watch it go down the gurgler?

COTTON

John doesn't want to spend the rest of his life being shat on. Perhaps he has a point.

VICKI

That's just great.

COTTON

What?

VICKI

We just throw in the towel?

Gran enters. She is carrying a large box of decorations.

GRAN

Found them.

She puts the box on the table and starts sorting through it. The decorations are rather worse for wear.

VICKI

Good for you!

COTTON

Where were they?

GRAN

In the cupboard under the sink in the kitchen. I wonder who the idiot was who put them there?

COTTON

(it was him)

Oh.

GRAN

I think they'll do another year. Don't you, Vicki?

VICKI

I'm sure they will.

GRAN

Do you think so?

VICKI

Perhaps they are a bit poked.

GRAN

Really? I think they'll be fine. They're a bit past their best, but aren't we all? Besides, we don't have money for new decorations.

VICKI

You're the boss.

GRAN

(examining the decorations)

What a shame. I suppose we could stretch to some crepe paper. Make some new streamers. I'll put it on the agenda.

Gran takes the carton and exits. A silence.

COTTON

We get by, don't we?

VICKI

(after a pause)

It didn't work. I'm not...[pregnant].

COTTON

When?

VICKI

This morning.

COTTON

I'm sorry.

VICKI

Me too.

COTTON

We can try again.

VICKI

What's the point?

COTTON

We can try that new thing. They said if it didn't work...[we could try IVF].

VICKI

It's expensive.

COTTON

I could rustle some cows.

VICKI

There's an idea.

(a beat)

What if we pin all our hopes on this one last thing and it doesn't work?

COTTON

Hey, come here.

She does. He hugs her.

There's nothing in the rules that says we can't keep trying. I know the little fullas are a bit sluggish, but...[you never know].

VICKI

Remember when we first started trying?

COTTON

Yeah.

VICKI

You said you felt like you were standing at stud.

COTTON

I wasn't complaining.

VICKI

Maybe it's just not meant to be.

COTTON

Now who's throwing in the towel?

Gran enters from one direction. John, Gore and Josh enter from another.

GRAN

You're late.

John sits at the table, catching his breath.³ He pulls out another chair and puts his feet up. The others remain standing.

JOHN

It's only family.

GRAN

Even so. It's almost a quarter past.

GORE

Sorry, Victoria. We had an unexpected visitor.

³ John is in the early stages of congestive heart failure.

So I see.

GRAN

Victoria, this is my nephew Josh. Josh, meet Mrs Gordon – mother, matriarch and stalwart of the AAW.

GORE

How do you do?

GRAN

Pleased to meet you.

JOSH

Hi, I'm Vicki.

VICKI

Hi.

JOSH

And this is Cotton.

VICKI

Kia ora.

COTTON

Sorry?

JOSH

It's a greeting.

VICKI

Like 'aloha'.

GORE

Something like that.

COTTON

You don't hear it so much.

JOSH

It means 'thank you' too. When I use it, everyone thinks I'm a kiwi.

GORE

The bird or the fruit?

COTTON

I'll do the jokes if you don't mind.

GORE

So, there we are.

GRAN

GORE

Of course, after 25 years, I've completely lost my accent. I blend right in.

GRAN

Time to get on.

JOSH

I should leave.

VICKI

But you've just got here.

GORE

Exactly what I said.

GRAN

There's a café in the main street. You could wait there while we have our meeting.

GORE

Perhaps he could help out. Since he'll be staying with us a while.

JOHN

When was this decided?

GORE

I decided. In the car on the way here.

JOSH

It's okay. Really.

GORE

Sort of an assistant. An assistant to the convenor of the catering committee. How does that sound?

VICKI

It's a great idea.

GRAN

I'm not sure.

VICKI

It'll be fun having someone new around.

GORE

(to Josh)

What do you think? You wouldn't mind lending Mrs Gordon a hand? Just for a week or two. You'll stay that long?

JOSH

(seeing he has no choice)

Sure.

GRAN

Well, that's settled.

VICKI

It's a pity you won't be staying long enough for the ball.

GORE

The Deerstalkers' Ball.

JOSH

The deer hunters have a dance?

GORE

Of course.

JOHN

A deerstalker has to be very light on his feet.

GRAN

Right then. Shall we?

She hands her clipboard to Josh and motions him to sit down.

You can start by taking the minutes.

JOSH

Minutes?

GRAN

Notes. Of the meeting. You'll find I run a tight ship.

Gran sits next to Josh at the head of the table. The others take their places.

Meeting of the catering committee of the AAW.

(to Josh)

Come on. Don't just sit there. Get writing. Saturday 10 April, 1993. Meeting brought to order at 11:20am.

JOSH

What does it stand for?

GRAN

Anglican Association of Women.

VICKI

Just write AAW.

JOSH

There are guys in the AAW?

Co-opted. GORE

Army volunteered. JOHN

First item on the agenda. I hardly need to remind you we're two months out from the ball and still no venison for supper. It's not all about trophy heads. GRAN

Cotton's got the hunting block booked next weekend. VICKI

(to Josh)
It's the end of the roar. COTTON

What are you hunting? JOSH

Red deer. COTTON

We have them back home. JOSH

A big stag. That's the plan anyway. COTTON

I know that country like the back of my hand. I'll come with you. JOHN

You're not going anywhere. GORE

His father had a bad heart. GRAN

Stop your wittering. I'm not done yet. JOHN

(to Josh)
I think you can put a tick by that item. COTTON

We'll give it a fair crack anyway. GRAN

Well, good on you for trying. VICKI

Let's not write him off.

GRAN

Of course not, dear. If Cotton kills it, you have first dibs on cooking it.

GORE

(to Josh)

It's a tradition. The venison casserole is the highpoint of the supper.

GRAN

(to Josh)

Item one. Venison. Action Cotton.

VICKI

The partner of whoever provides the venison for the supper gets to cook the casserole.

GORE

(to Josh)

Kind of like being Prom Queen. But different.

JOSH

(to Vicki – ignoring Gore)

Even if the partner is a guy?

GRAN

(to Josh)

Did you get that down?

GORE

My casserole was legendary. Back in the day.

GRAN

And mine.

GORE

John's a crack shot.

COTTON

(to Josh)

Won the Glen Morton Trophy – three years' running.

JOHN

Gave up competing after that.

(referring to the stag's head)

Decided to get this one mounted.

COTTON

It's a beauty isn't it?

JOSH

Bigger than a Buick.

	COTTON
That could have been a winner too.	
	VICKI
(to Josh)	
You can't mount a competition head. It has to be just the skull and the antlers.	
	GORE
Ghastly.	
	COTTON
One of the greats.	
	GORE
But now he hasn't got the puff.	
	JOHN
I <i>am</i> here, you know.	
	GORE
I do love a good venison casserole.	
	GRAN
I'll never forget that first time.	
	GORE
It was time to make a point.	
	VICKI
(to Gran)	
Go on. Tell Josh the story.	
	GRAN
We don't have time. We're running late as it is.	
	JOSH
Please, Mrs Gordon. I'd like to hear it.	
	GRAN
(to Gore)	
What a charming young man. Isn't he charming?	
	JOHN
Too charming by half.	
	GRAN
Oh, all right then.	
(to Josh)	
You can put the pen down...	

JOHN

Here we go.

GRAN

... Gore had been on the fringes of things – it's always handy to have a man to carve – but not really on the committee as such. Didn't come to meetings. Just helped out on the night.

JOHN

As it should be.

GRAN

A bit like this year, the date for the ball was fast approaching and we had no venison. The meeting had just started and in walks Gore. "Excuse me, ladies," he said. "I have news."

GORE

Then I took a seat.

GRAN

Cool as a cucumber! No man had ever sat down at a meeting of the catering committee of the AAW. Not even the vicar. I can see him now – taking his time, making himself comfortable.

GORE

A good entrance can get you a long way.

GRAN

"You'll be pleased to know," he said. "John went up the mountain this afternoon and shot a nice buck. It's hanging in the woodshed."

JOHN

(to Cotton)

I strapped it to my back. Carried out the whole carcass.

GRAN

(to John)

Who's telling this story?

She continues.

There was absolute silence. My Aunt Aggie was convenor. Never married. Quite formidable. Everyone was looking at her to see what she would say. You could have heard a pin drop. "Just don't make it too spicy," she said.

JOSH

That's cool.

GORE

No one ever questioned it after that.

VICKI
And I'm going to carry on the family tradition.

GRAN
Don't count your chickens...

COTTON
Thanks a lot.

JOHN
(to Cotton)
Don't you listen...[to her].

GRAN
Perhaps we should turn our attention to the next item. The decorations.

COTTON
(to Josh)
So you hunt?

JOSH
(to Cotton)
My dad used to take me.

GRAN
As Vicki so charmingly pointed out, the decorations are poked...

VICKI
I'm sure they'll be fine.

COTTON
(to Josh)
Maybe you could come with us.

JOSH
(to Cotton)
Sure. I'd like that.

JOHN
There are only two bunks.

GRAN
(to John)
Would you stop interrupting? You're distracting Josh.

JOHN
It was Cotton.

GRAN
If you're going to be difficult, you might as well leave.

JOHN

(standing up)
I need to pee anyway.

GRAN

For goodness sake.

JOHN

(to Cotton)
Come on, son. Pub's open. Let's go have a beer while this lot finish up.

Cotton looks at Vicki.

VICKI

Go on then.

JOHN

(to Cotton)
Come on. Rattle your dags. Before they volunteer us for the washing up.

COTTON

(to Josh)
Want to join us?

GORE

Why not? It'll give you boys a chance to bond.

GRAN

You stay where you are.

COTTON

Give him a break. He's only just got here.

GRAN

He's my assistant.

GORE

What it is to be popular.

VICKI

Surely Josh is old enough to make up his own mind.

(to Josh)
What would you like to do?

JOSH

(looking at Vicki)
I think I'd like to stay.

SCENE 4 - THEN

Saturday 17 April 1993. Early afternoon. John and Gore's living room.

John is sitting at the table reading the paper. Gore is tidying up after lunch – wiping the table etc. Gran is sitting on a sofa watching Josh fold a streamer from crepe paper. Josh is rushing to get the job done.

GRAN

(referring to the streamer)
I'm not sure pink and orange go together.

JOSH

It'll look great. Trust me.

GRAN

It's not a race you know.

JOSH

Cotton wants a hand to get the hunting gear ready for tomorrow.

GORE

Cotton can wait his turn. It's time for our dancing lesson.

JOSH

Can't we do it later?

GORE

If you want to get lucky, you need to be able to do a basic step. A girl might want that Mercurio boy, but she'll most likely settle for not having her toes stepped on. I'll get the others.

Gore exits to the kitchen. Gran starts making a streamer of her own.

GRAN

(to Josh)
Do you have a girlfriend?

JOSH

No.

GRAN

A handsome lad like you? A boyfriend?

JOSH

No.

GRAN

Probably just as well. It can't be an easy road.

JOSH

I'm okay with it. I mean, most people I know are.

GRAN

What? Homosexual?

JOSH

No. I mean, okay with it. I think most people are cool with it.

GRAN

One has to move with the times. Now here.

She shows Josh how to fold the streamer properly.

Fold it neatly. At right angles. Otherwise it'll have gaping holes.

JOSH

Back home, bunting comes all made up. You just have to hang it.

Cotton and Vicki enter, followed by Gore.

COTTON

Why do we have to do it now? The ball's two months away.

Gore and Vicki move chairs to the side of the room.

GORE

Is that all? Don't remind me.

(referring to Josh)

This one doesn't know a quickstep from a rumba.

VICKI

So long as he can do a box step, he'll be fine.

JOHN

What's the point in teaching him to dance? It's only for one night.

GORE

I'm not having anyone let the side down. Josh's dance training is a matter of urgency.

JOHN

I thought shooting a deer was a matter of urgency.

Hear, hear.

GRAN

There's plenty of time to do both.

VICKI

Gore wants to move John's chair.

GORE

You. Into the other room. Unless you want to stay and practise with us.

JOHN

I don't need to practise. I have natural rhythm.

John takes his paper and exits. Gore indicates the table. Cotton helps him move it aside.

COTTON

(to Josh)

Come on, mate. He's not going to take no for an answer.

JOSH

I'm helping Mrs Gordon make streamers.

GRAN

You may call me 'Gran'.

JOSH

I can?

GRAN

Doesn't mean I'm going soft.

JOSH

No ma'am.

COTTON

We've all been there. It's not so bad once you get the hang of it.

VICKI

Gore taught us all to dance.

Gore goes to the sideboard to put on music.

GORE

Now. Let's start with a demonstration. Cotton? Vicki?

COTTON

Right. One dance and I'm gone.

VICKI

Then let's make it count. Shall we?

Cotton and Vicki dance. Cotton, it turns out, is rather good. Initially, Gore points out the moves, but stops as Cotton and Vicki become absorbed in the dance.

GORE

Forward-side-together. Backwards-side-together. See?

The dance finishes. Applause.

COTTON

(to Vicki)

And with that, toku whaiaipo, I take my leave.⁴

He kisses her and exits.

GORE

If only John were that romantic.

(a beat)

Would it be so terrible if we danced together? Just once.

GRAN

That would be a bridge too far.

VICKI

It's not as though people don't know.

GRAN

Knowing is one thing. Seeing is another matter altogether.

GORE

Don't scare the chickens.

VICKI

You might get run out of town.

GRAN

It's not a laughing matter. There are rules, Vicki. Unwritten rules. You break them at your peril.

Meanwhile, Josh has edged his way towards the door.

GORE

Where do you think you're sneaking off to, young man?

⁴ Toku whaiaipo – my love

I'm not.

JOSH

GRAN
A man should be able to dance. And not that jumping up and down you do nowadays. Proper dancing.

VICKI
Come on. We won't bite.

GORE
(to Josh)
Come stand by me.

Gore instructs Josh more or less as follows – correcting any mistakes and getting him to repeat the moves as necessary.

Now start with your left foot. Follow me. Forward-side-together. Backwards-side-together. Again. There you go.

JOSH
It's hard with everyone watching.

GORE
There'll be a lot more people watching at the ball.

VICKI
You're doing fine.

GORE
You see? Now, waltz rhythm 1-2-3; 1-2-3. That's it.

They stop.

GORE
Good. Now let's try it together.

Vicki takes charge of the music. Gore turns to Josh.

GORE
Now we stand together like this. Now, you lead. With your left foot. Forward-side-together. Backwards-side-together.

(calling out to John)
Oh my goodness! Two men dancing together. Call the police.

(to Josh)
Now slide your feet. The idea is to glide around the room. You're dancing, not setting off on a five mile hike. 1-2-3; 1-2-3. Head up. Don't look down at your feet.

That's better. Now bend your knee as you step forward – and then again as you step back. Rise and fall. 1-2-3; 1-2-3. There you go. You're dancing.

JOSH

It feels weird.

GORE

(calling off)

Look, John. Dancing with a straight man.

(to Josh)

You are, aren't you?

(calling off)

Is he embarrassed? No. Are his balls going to drop off? No. Are you listening? No.

They stop. Vicki sees Josh is embarrassed.

VICKI

(to Gore)

Maybe you could let me show him the ropes?

GORE

We're just getting started.

VICKI

No, really. Let me.

GORE

Steal him away, then. See if I care.

Vicki approaches Josh.

VICKI

May I have the pleasure?

JOSH

Sure.

Gore puts the music on. Josh and Vicki dance with Vicki taking over the role of teacher, improvising as necessary. Josh is smitten.

GORE

(inviting Gran to dance)

Victoria?

GRAN

Me? Get away with you.

GORE

Come on. We can't let the young ones have all the fun.

As Gran gets up, she moves Josh's streamer off her lap.

GRAN

Pink and orange? Really. What's the world coming to?

Gore dances Gran around the room.

GORE

Beautiful. Just beautiful.

SCENE 5 – THEN

A few days later. Evening. Outside Cotton and Vicki's farm cottage.

A stag's head and neck covered in congealed blood is hanging from a tree. The effect should be grotesque. John and Cotton stand admiring it.

JOHN

Beautiful, son. Just beautiful.

COTTON

You think so?

JOHN

Look at the spread on it.

COTTON

Yeah.

JOHN

A 12-pointer. Where did you get it?

COTTON

Down at Archie's Creek.

JOHN

I knew it.

COTTON

I thought you might have been having a laugh. Sending me down that gully. God, it's a steep climb. Hell of a lot steeper on the way up.

JOHN

It's a damn fine head.

COTTON

I was having a bit of a spell. You know. Crouching at the water's edge getting a drink. I looked up and there it was. I couldn't believe my eyes.

JOHN

Dad's old rifle still does the business.

COTTON

I was shaking like a leaf. I was so busy thinking about my speech at the Deerstalkers' Ball, I almost missed it.

Josh enters carrying a pack and a rifle.
He sits down exhausted.

JOHN

Not too late to have it mounted

COTTON

You must be kidding.

JOHN

You're right. That's a competition head if ever I saw one.

JOSH

It's awesome.

COTTON

Had to leave the rest of it where it fell.

JOHN

I thought the boy was with you?

JOSH

I had trouble keeping up. Then the fog came down and I lost him completely.

JOHN

Are you sure you've been hunting before?

JOSH

Not like this.

COTTON

Takes it out of you, eh?

JOHN

Shame about the meat.

COTTON

Here's Vic home now. This isn't going to be pretty.

COTTON

It was right at the bottom of a gully, Vic. There's no way.

JOHN

Two hundred kilos dead weight.

JOSH

He got the backstrap.

VICKI

How am I going to feed 100 people with a backstrap?

COTTON

It's a great head.

JOHN

Perhaps we ought to be going.

VICKI

I can't cook a head. What were you thinking?

COTTON

The fog came down. Josh got lost. It was just me.

(pause)

I'm not blaming him. I'm just saying.

JOHN

Gore will be wondering where we've got to.

COTTON

It's a trophy head, Vic. It could be my year.

JOHN

He's right about that.

VICKI

(to John)

You stay out of it.

COTTON

Look at it, Vic.

JOHN

He could hardly leave it behind.

Vicki glares at him.

Sorry, mate. You're on your own.

He picks up the gun.

(to Josh)
Come on, lad. We'd better get you home and cleaned up.

Josh gets up and shoulders the pack.

COTTON
Hey, mate?

JOSH
Yep?

COTTON
You did okay.

JOSH
Thanks.

COTTON
You know, it's less than a fortnight 'til duck shooting.

JOSH
It is?

COTTON
I could use a hand getting the maimai ready.⁵ You up for it?

JOSH
So long as I don't have to go climbing any mountains.

COTTON
Good on you.

Josh and John exit.

How was your night?

VICKI
Gore and I have been practising the quickstep.

COTTON
How's it going?

VICKI
Okay.

COTTON
I'm sorry, Vic. I couldn't leave it behind. I just couldn't do it.

VICKI
I wanted to make the casserole. It's a tradition. Like carrying on the family name.

⁵ Maimai – a makeshift hunter's hut used for shelter and camouflage.

Don't, Vic. COTTON

Like winning a trophy. VICKI

That's different. COTTON

How? VICKI

It's my first deer in fifteen years. COTTON

Maybe you could go back. VICKI

To Crown Rock? You want me to climb back down to Archie's Creek? COTTON

The meat'll be okay. It's cold. It has to hang anyway. We just won't tell anyone. VICKI

Pigs'll have it by now. Anyway, I'm knackered. COTTON

(pause)
I'm sorry.

You're right. It's just a stupid casserole. VICKI

Go inside out of the cold. I'll be in soon. COTTON

Vicki exits. Cotton watches her go then turns his attention back to the stag. After a bit, he begins practising his roar.

COTTON
Runner up. No. Winner of the stag-roaring competition. As judged by 'the ladies'!
Cotton Tarawhiti. And now for the business end of proceedings. The big prize.
Winner of the Glen Morton Trophy 1993. Cotton Tarawhiti. Tēnā koutou. Tēnā koutou.

(pause)
Nah.

SCENE 6

Saturday 24 April 1993. Near a pond on John's farm.

Cotton and Josh are spreading a camouflage net over a maimai.

COTTON

Back home, when we were kids, we used to hunt deer on horseback.

JOSH

With guns?

COTTON

We didn't kill them. We caught them. They were worth more alive than dead.

JOSH

Still sounds like the Wild West.

COTTON

My cousin, Mak. He can ride, man. Ride like you wouldn't believe. This time we were hunting at Hanamahihi.

JOSH

Where's that?

COTTON

The middle of nowhere, man. Such a beautiful place. Really wild. We'd stay in huts in the bush. My cousin and me and my dad and my uncle. We'd get up early and head up to one of the tributaries of the Whakatane River. We'd ride as far as it took for the dogs to catch a scent. Once they did, one of us would stay put and the rest of us would go downhill and act as scouts. 'Backstops' we used to call it. Idea was the dogs would chase the deer down to the river bed where we could run it down.

This time, my cousin and I were waiting down by the river. I think uncle went and smoked some pot up the hill away from us. I was 17. Mak was 13. My annoying little cousin. Just a skinny little kid.

They finish camouflaging the maimai.

There. Just need to throw up a fence around it and we're done.

Cotton indicates the sofa from the earlier scene.

Hey, give us a lift with this will you? Thanks. No point in being uncomfortable.

They carry the sofa into the maimai.

JOSH

I'm not putting you out am I?

COTTON

Na. I always shoot with John. We've been going to the same posie for years. Down at the river.

JOSH

I've never actually shot a gun before.

COTTON

Seriously?

JOSH

When I said my dad took me hunting? I really just used to tag along.

COTTON

You'll be right. Vic'll look after you.

Cotton fetches gear for a temporary electric fence.

JOSH

So what happened? With your cousin?

Cotton will run a single strand around the maimai while he finishes his story.

COTTON

Oh, yeah. We'd heard the dogs barking, so we go to our positions. The deer ran past me. I was probably picking my nose or something. I saw the deer run across the river to where my cousin was and I saw him hoofing it on his horse, chasing this deer. He was kind of angling it back to the river. He got so close, the deer's hooves were in the shallows – the water slowing it down.

Mak was fiddling with his belt buckle. And I thought, 'Shit, what's he doing?' He let the reins of his horse go and then swung his leg over so he was sitting almost side saddle on his horse. I saw him pull his belt off. And then he nudged his horse, driving the deer into a deeper bit of water. Then he made a massive dive – leapt on it.

JOSH

No way?

COTTON

They both collapsed into the water. By this time I was racing down to the river – yelling and hollering.

JOSH

That's awesome.

COTTON

By the time I got there he'd managed to loop his belt around the deer's neck and one of its front legs and was holding it there so it couldn't move. And then my uncle

had come down and we were going, 'Whoa! Shit, that was awesome! What were you thinking, man?' All he said was, 'Go get my bloody horse.'

He can ride, man. That Mak can ride. Legend.

SCENE 7

Saturday 1 May 1993. A maimai on opening day of duck shooting.

Vicki and Josh enter in darkness.

VICKI

(whispers)

Wait. Stop. Remember, there's a hotwire about here somewhere.

JOSH

I can't see it.

VICKI

See the stakes? Just in front of you.

JOSH

I'm not going anywhere near an electric fence.

VICKI

Keep your voice down. Go under it.

JOSH

You go under it.

VICKI

Here. Hold these.

She hands him a shotgun and a small pack and crawls under the hot wire.

Electric fence. Kiwi invention. Stops the cattle pushing over the maimai.

Josh hands Vicki the gear and crawls under the wire.

JOSH

I thought John hated cows.

VICKI

Beef cattle. They're different.

JOSH

They all look the same to me.

VICKI
Here we are. What do you think?

JOSH
That sofa looks good.

VICKI
I'll get you a coffee.

JOSH
Sure, why not. I've had two already this morning and I still feel like crap.

VICKI
Here. Hold this.

Vicki hands him her shotgun. She will pour two cups of coffee from a thermos.

JOSH
This is a lot like opening day of hunting back home. You get up in the pitch black on a day you don't have to, head out to the woods and sit freezing your ass. They're not even good to eat.

Vicki hands him a cup of coffee and takes back the gun.

VICKI
You boys were hitting the beers pretty hard last night.

JOSH
It sure made Uncle Gore's dancing lesson go a little better.

VICKI
You reckon?

They sip their coffees.

JOSH
You don't strike me as the hunting type.

VICKI
Don't I? I aim for the drakes. It's very satisfying.

JOSH
You're funny.

VICKI
Funny haha? Or funny weird?

JOSH
A bit of both.

Thanks. VICKI

(pause)
You'll perk up when you get your first shot away.

I need to go to the bathroom. JOSH

Just go behind a bush. VICKI

He goes upstage to pee. Vicki sorts out her gear, puts on camo paint etc. Josh shrieks.

Son of a bitch! JOSH

Keep your voice down. VICKI

Jesus Christ! JOSH

You'll scare the ducks for miles. VICKI

I don't care about the freakin' ducks. Son of a bitch! JOSH

Bit of a belt? I should have warned you. VICKI

How many volts is that thing? JOSH

I don't know. Twelve. VICKI

Are you sure? It could have killed me. JOSH

Well it didn't. VICKI

I could be permanently injured. JOSH

You'll be fine. VICKI

JOSH

How do you know?

VICKI

I'm a nurse. I know. It'll be fine.

JOSH

That's easy for you to say. I'm going to die a virgin. All because I peed on a freakin' electric fence.

VICKI

Just keep holding it. The pain'll go away.

JOSH

I think we should go to the ER.

VICKI

A&E? There isn't one. Not around here. Not for miles. We'd miss the whole morning's shooting.

JOSH

Thanks a freakin' bunch.

VICKI

You'll be fine. Honest.

(pause)

And keep your voice down. It's getting light.

They watch for ducks on the wing.

Are you really a virgin?

JOSH

Yeah. Well, maybe. Yeah. What does it matter?

VICKI

So what have you been doing at varsity? Not studying from what Gore says.

JOSH

Not that again. Can we talk about something else?

VICKI

Sorry. You're just easy to pick on right now.

JOSH

Injured.

VICKI

Hung over.

And injured. JOSH

How is it? VICKI

I'll live. JOSH

You don't need to be embarrassed. VICKI

Who said I was embarrassed. JOSH

Vicki takes her duck call and makes a 'greeting call'.

So why New Zealand? VICKI

I needed to get away from home. JOSH

Couldn't you get away from home without coming ten thousand miles? VICKI

It was Mom's idea. She was hoping I'd get a cheap education. JOSH

And you? VICKI

I was kind of hoping to get laid. I was told Kiwi chicks really dig the accent. JOSH

Vicki laughs.

Things didn't really work out on that score.

Is that why you ended up down here? VICKI

I guess I got into a bit of trouble. No job. No money. So I came down here. JOSH

So now what? VICKI

No idea. And I don't want to go back home. JOSH

VICKI

Can't you go back to varsity?

JOSH

I kind of flunked my first year classes. Mom's all bent out of shape. Said she'd cut off my allowance if I didn't pass this semester.

VICKI

And?

JOSH

It's not looking good.

VICKI

(pointing)

There are some ducks coming in now. Ten o'clock. See?

Josh stands up and reaches for his gun.

JOSH

Shouldn't we get ready?

VICKI

Let them land. They'll circle first.

JOSH

Couldn't we get them from here?

VICKI

You might hit one, but you'd probably just wound it.

She calls again ('greeting call').

The skill is in calling them in. You should be able to see their eyes before you shoot.

Josh raises his shotgun. He doesn't know what he's doing. Vicki hands him a cartridge belt.

VICKI

It might help if it was loaded.

JOSH

Thanks.

VICKI

You really haven't shot a gun before, have you?

JOSH

No.

Here. Let me.

VICKI

Josh hands Vicki the gun. She shows him how to load it.

Break it open like this. Put the shells in. Now put the safety on.

She leans the gun against the side of the maimai.

Now it's ready to go.

Thanks.

JOSH

Vicki starts calling again ('lonesome hen').

VICKI

(whispers)
I've got their attention. See. They're coming in.

Josh picks up the gun.

JOSH

(whispers)
I see.

VICKI

Remember to put the safety off. Brace it against your shoulder. Here, let me show you.

She stands behind Josh and guides him.

Now a duck's a moving target, right? Aim well ahead of it – give it a 12-foot gate.

JOSH

A what?

VICKI

Shhh. Concentrate. Now you've got to move with it. Swing through. That's right. You're doing fine. Now pull the trigger.

He does.

SFX Gun shot.

Black out.

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

SCENE 8 - THEN

Saturday 5 June 1993. Evening. A meeting room at the town hall.

Gore and Gran enter in darkness.

GRAN

I can never remember where the damn switch is.

GORE

It's on the other side of the room.

GRAN

Of course.

GORE

Don't you go. You'll have a fall.

GRAN

You'll keep.

(a beat)

I've got a torch here somewhere.

GORE

I don't need it.

Sound of Gore crashing into something.

Son of a bitch.

GRAN

(amused)

If the ladies only knew.

GORE

That I'm no lady? Got it.

Gore switches the light on.

There.

GRAN

That's better.

Gore switches on a one-bar heater.

GORE

Where have those two got to?

GRAN

They were with us when we came in.

GORE

We can't start without Vicki. We won't have a quorum.

GRAN

And John and Cotton seem to have fallen by the wayside.

Josh enters.

GORE

There you are.

GRAN

Where's Vicki?

JOSH

She had to go to the restroom.

GRAN

It's the cold.

She hands Josh her clipboard.

Let's get started. Meeting of the catering committee of the AAW.

(to Josh)

Come on. Get writing. Saturday 5 June 1993. Meeting brought to order at 7:00pm. First item on the agenda – and rather urgent – venison.

GORE

We're certainly running out of time. The animal has to hang.

GRAN

We can't rely on Cotton. Or our young friend here.

JOSH

Cotton said we'd keep trying.

GRAN

He's hardly the great white hunter. No offence.

JOSH

What happens if there's no venison?

GORE

We improvise.

GRAN

I do a marinade that makes lamb taste wonderfully gamey.

Vicki enters.

We didn't wait.

GRAN

Are you all right?

GORE

I don't feel so good.

VICKI

What's wrong?

GRAN

Must be something I ate.

VICKI

Josh offers his chair to Vicki.

Sit here. It's closer to the heater.

JOSH

Vicki ignores him.

I'm all right.

VICKI

You do look a bit green about the gills.

GORE

I think you'd be better sitting here.

JOSH

I'm fine.

VICKI

Right then. Where were we?

GRAN

Assuming there is some sort of casserole. What do we serve it with?

GORE

Potatoes, of course. We can get them from the farm?

GRAN

John was hoping to sell them.

GORE

It hasn't come to that, has it? Surely we're not to become a family of market gardeners.

GRAN

What if we served it with rice?
 VICKI

Rice?
 GRAN

For goodness sake.
 GORE

That's fancy.
 GRAN

What about pasta? We eat lots of pasta back home.
 JOSH

Vicki glares at him.

Rice for 100? I wouldn't know where to start.
 GORE

It might make a change.
 VICKI

I don't see any reason to go changing things. You know where you are with a pot of spuds.
 GRAN

We could borrow crock pots and do rice in those.
 VICKI

Sort of retro and *avant garde* all at once?
 GORE

You seem very keen all of a sudden.
 GRAN

I've been experimenting with beef.
 VICKI

Really?
 GRAN

Cotton thought I used a bit much garlic.
 VICKI

Garlic? You want to go easy on that.
 GORE

Especially when there's dancing.
 GRAN

VICKI

There's nothing wrong with trying something different. It is the 1990s after all. We're still making rolls with canned asparagus.

GORE

I happen to like canned asparagus.

VICKI

It's naff.

JOSH

Should I be writing this down?

GRAN

We're getting off track. Who's in charge of this shooting match anyway?

GORE

(to Josh)

Why don't you go into the kitchen and rustle us up some coffee? I put the Zip on when we came in.

JOSH

Sure.

He exits.

VICKI

It was just a suggestion.

GORE

My asparagus rolls are always the first to go.

GRAN

The mayonnaise is a lovely touch.

VICKI

Maybe it's time for a change.

GRAN

If you served casserole with rice there'd be a riot.

GORE

And where am I supposed to find fresh asparagus in June?

VICKI

I'm sorry I spoke.

GRAN

Next you'll want my job.

VICKI

I don't want to be convenor of the catering committee. I just want to make the casserole.

GRAN

I have no intention of standing down.

VICKI

I'm just trying to help.

GRAN

Do you want me to stand down? Is that it?

GORE

Certainly not.

GRAN

Goodness knows, there's little enough an old lady can do to be useful. But if you want me to go.

VICKI

Gran, I didn't say that.

GORE

Let's move on, shall we?

GRAN

Yes. Now what about dessert?

GORE

I'm already saving eggs for the pavs.

GRAN

And trifle of course.

GORE

I quite fancy a mountain of éclairs. All gooey with chocolate.

GRAN

Vicki?

VICKI

I think I'm going to be sick.

Vicki rushes off.

GRAN

If I didn't know better.

GORE

Exactly.

GRAN
But Cotton's been firing blanks for years.

GORE
Miracle on the eve of the Deerstalkers' Ball?

GRAN
Or food poisoning.

GORE
Or food poisoning.

GRAN
Hardly an advertisement for an aspiring convenor of the Catering Committee of the AAW.

SCENE 9 – THEN

A few days later. John and Gore's living room.

John and Gore are dancing side by side – practising steps.

GORE
1-2-3. 1-2-3. And now ...

Gore executes a chassé.

JOHN
That's just showing off.

GORE
There's nothing wrong with a little finesse.

John stops dancing and catches his breath. Gore continues practising steps a little longer.

JOHN
Just do the basics well, I say. I don't need your fancy steps.

GORE
You're just jealous because I'll be the belle of the ball.

JOHN
You are always the belle of the ball.

John goes over to the window.

GORE
No sign of her yet. How long does it take?

JOHN
How should I know?

GORE
She is, isn't she?

JOHN
Don't go getting your hopes up.

GORE
She will come and tell us?

JOHN
When she's ready.

GORE
She must be.

JOHN
Here's a car.

GORE
Who is it?

JOHN
It's Mother.

GORE
Oh.

JOHN
How did she find out?

GORE
Don't look at me.

He dances another few steps.

I just can't keep still. You know what this means?

JOHN
We don't know anything yet. Not for certain.

GORE
You'll take him fishing. Teach him to shoot. One day he'll take over the farm.

JOHN
We'll be compost by then.

GORE
Speak for yourself. Of course, if it's a girl...

(sings)
 “My little girl
 Pink and white
 As peaches and cream is she...”⁶

JOHN

(recognising the song)
 My boy Bill! It’ll be a boy. I’m picking, John Junior.

GORE

Now wouldn’t that be something?

JOHN

I didn’t think he had it in him.

GORE

Isn’t it wonderful?

JOHN

John Junior wouldn’t be so bad.

GORE

Jack.

JOHN

Jack? I like that. Like my old Dad.

GORE

It could be a girl.

JOHN

It won’t be. I have a feeling about it.

Gran enters carrying a shopping bag.

What are you doing here?

GORE

Vicki’s gone to the doctor.

GRAN

I know.

JOHN

How?

⁶

GRAN

It doesn't take long for the drums to start beating.

GORE

According to John, it's a boy and we're calling him Jack.

GRAN

Aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves?

GORE

What's in the bag?

GRAN

Nothing.

Gore tries to look.

None of your beeswax.

GORE

Isn't it exciting? We're beside ourselves.

GRAN

It's a girl, of course.

JOHN

Don't count your chickens...

GRAN

Morning sickness this bad? It's a girl.

GORE

Whatever it is. It's a miracle.

GRAN

We can have a photo done. Me sitting in a chair holding her. My daughter and granddaughter standing behind. All looking terribly serious. Four generations. Wouldn't that be something?

JOHN

There's her car now.

GORE

Are you sure?

GRAN

Act natural. Like we don't know anything.

JOHN

We don't know anything. Not really.

Of course we know. GORE

I wonder if Cotton does. GRAN

Should I sit? Or should I stand? JOHN

He seemed pretty happy at lunchtime. GORE

That's because he was going up the mountain with Josh. JOHN

He's taken quite a shine to him. GORE

Stand, I think. JOHN

You see. He's a born father. See how he's taken that lad under his wing. GRAN

Quick. She's coming. GORE

Everyone scrambles to take their 'places'. GORE

I think I'll sit. Now, remember. It's her news. JOHN

Of course. GRAN

Absolutely. GORE

Where's my paper? JOHN

It's under your chair where you always leave it. GORE

Gore fusses over John, making sure he has his feet up.

Get away with you. JOHN

Vicki enters.

Hi. VICKI

You're here too. She sees Gran.

I just popped in. GRAN

No reason. GORE

Just popped in. GRAN

I was looking for Cotton. Have you seen him? VICKI

Up the mountain. GORE

Taken Josh to see if they can get a deer. JOHN

We still need venison for the ball. GRAN

They should be back soon. GORE

Why don't you wait here? GRAN

I'll get you a cup of tea. You look pale. GORE

Here, have my seat. JOHN

I don't need to sit down. VICKI

Is something wrong? GORE

For goodness sake. I can't bear it any longer. Are you or aren't you? GRAN

Her news, remember? JOHN

What do you mean? VICKI

Pregnant. GORE

Gore! JOHN

You knew? VICKI

We all knew. GRAN

Then you are? JOHN

I need to talk to Cotton. VICKI

Of course, you do. We won't say a word. GRAN

Congratulations. JOHN

It's wonderful news. It really is. GORE

Wonderful. We're so pleased for you. GRAN

And Cotton. He must be stoked. JOHN

He doesn't know. VICKI

He doesn't? JOHN

She just wanted to be sure. GORE

He's been disappointed before. GRAN

We're so proud. GORE

GRAN
How far along?

VICKI
I really need to talk to Cotton.

GRAN
Gran brings out the shopping bag.

GRAN
I just bought a few things. Nothing expensive. It's not too soon to start a layette...

GORE
A 'layette'? Now there's posh.

VICKI
Thanks, Gran. But I really don't feel...[like looking at baby clothes...]

GRAN
Oh, nonsense. I know you won't have anything put by. You weren't expecting... No one was expecting...

GORE
...that you'd be expecting.

GRAN
(to Gore)
Would you put your lips together?

(to Victoria)
I must phone your mother. She'll be thrilled.

VICKI
I wouldn't be so sure.

GRAN
At some point, every woman wants to be a grandmother.

VICKI
I doubt this is what Mum had in mind.

GRAN
Poppycock. The longer you go without one, the less concerned you are about the circumstances.

JOHN
Here are the hunters now.

VICKI
Don't say anything. Okay?

GRAN
Absolutely not.

It's your news.

JOHN

How exciting!

GORE

Cotton and Josh enter.

COTTON

Well, lookee here! The committee gathered to greet us. We have news, members.

(referring to Josh)

This, my friends, is my lucky charm. Nākau nui.⁷

You shot a deer?

GRAN

And you brought it home?

GORE

The meat? Something useful?

GRAN

All the best bits present and accounted for. You are looking at 'the provider'!

GRAN

Good for you.

COTTON

(to Vicki)

And you, toku whaiaipo, shall go to the ball and claim your spot as the casserole queen.

JOHN

And the family will have its second winner of the Glen Morton.

GRAN

Don't count your chickens.

COTTON

(to Josh)

How was it, bro?

JOSH

Pretty awesome.

COTTON

We were working our way up this track.

⁷ Nākau nui – big hearted/a giving person.

JOSH

One in back of the other.

COTTON

Steep, eh?

JOSH

We were coming up to the top of the hill. All I could think about was getting there and taking a load off...[my feet].

COTTON

But I had a hunch. Near the top of the mountain, where it flattens out. They hole up there during the day and feed. We edged our way up...[to the top of the ridge].

JOSH

Crawled on our bellies – like marines going over the top.

COTTON

And there they were. A stag and a couple of hinds.

JOSH

And we stalked those suckers.

COTTON

That deer out there. That deer is handpicked.

JOHN

I think this deserves a toast.

GORE

I am the eternal optimist. There's a bottle of bubbles in the fridge.

JOHN

I'll get it.

John exits.

GORE

Oh, I think I'm going to cry.

GRAN

Gore, it's a deer.

GORE

It's all just too perfect.

COTTON

Hey, Vic. You're not saying much.

GRAN

Well, it's not up to me to say, but you may just have stolen her thunder.

What's up, Vic? COTTON

Nothing. I'm fine. VICKI

Vicki has news. GRAN

Fantastic news. GORE

What? What is it? COTTON

We'll talk. Later. VICKI

For goodness sake. You can't keep the man in suspense. GRAN

You're going to be a father. GORE

Vicki's expecting. GRAN

Seriously? COTTON

You are? JOSH

Just confirmed today. GORE

Oh, my God! COTTON

Cotton takes Vicki in his arms. He kisses her.

Am I just the happiest man?

Cotton turns to Josh.

It's him you know. My lucky charm. Ever since Josh arrived. Kia ora, man. Kia ora.

He turns his attention back to Vicki.

Oh, my God. I don't believe it. Are you okay? Is everything okay? With pēpi?⁸

VICKI

I'm fine.

COTTON

Are you sure? Should you be sitting down?

GRAN

For goodness sake. She's pregnant. Not ill.

GORE

I'm so happy for you both. Ecstatic.

Gore hugs Cotton.

COTTON

I can't believe it.

Gran goes up to Cotton and kisses him on the cheek.

GRAN

Well done.

COTTON

Thanks, Gran.

John enters carrying a bottle of wine. He will open it while Gore sorts out glasses etc. Pouring the wine will form part of the celebration that follows.

COTTON

(to John)

I'm going to be a dad, man.

JOHN

Congratulations, son.

John shakes Cotton's hand.

COTTON

Kia ora, mate.

JOHN

It's fantastic news.

COTTON

You knew?

⁸ Pēpi – baby.

I had a hunch.	JOHN
Practice makes perfect. Isn't that right?	COTTON
Let's not go into unpleasant details. Oh, give us another hug.	GORE
	Gore hugs Cotton. As they celebrate, Gran, John, Cotton and Gore don't appear to notice Vicki and Josh have been left out of their self-congratulatory loop.
He's a dark horse, isn't he?	JOHN
It's just wonderful.	GORE
Kia ora.	COTTON
Bloody fantastic.	JOHN
I can't believe it.	COTTON
It's wonderful. It really is.	GRAN
A toast!	GORE
No.	VICKI
I insist.	GORE
Stop it!	VICKI
What?	GORE
Is something wrong?	GRAN

COTTON
(to Vicki)
It's great news, isn't it? What we always wanted.

VICKI
It's not.

GORE
Are you okay? The baby?

VICKI
The baby's fine.

COTTON
You're okay? There's nothing wrong...

VICKI
I'm fine.

GRAN
What then?

VICKI
(to Cotton)
The baby. The baby isn't yours.

GORE
It isn't?

JOHN
Be quiet.

GRAN
I don't understand.

GORE
Who then?

Vicki looks at Josh. The penny drops.
Cotton looks at Josh.

COTTON
Mate.

SCENE 10 – THEN

Later that afternoon. John and Gore's living room.

Gran is sitting on the sofa holding the bag with the baby clothes. Gore is clearing away the glasses. There is tension in the air. After a silence.

GRAN

Perhaps I didn't handle that very well.

GORE

What? When you demanded the clothes back? Or when you threatened to throw her off the committee?

GRAN

Everyone knows I shoot from the hip.

GORE

Yes, well don't expect any sympathy from me. Poor Cotton. I can't imagine how he's feeling.

GRAN

I hope John caught up with him.

GORE

It's a shock for all of us, but Cotton...

GRAN

What was Vicki thinking?

GORE

I suspect thinking didn't factor into it.

GRAN

He seemed such a nice young man.

GORE

He is. Precisely that. A young man. And young men are not exactly known for thinking with their heads.

GRAN

Vicki should have known better.

GORE

I, for one, am not going to judge.

(pause)

GRAN

So, now what?

GORE
 We're going to stay icy calm.

GRAN
 I don't see what good that's going to do.

GORE
 It's a bit of a mess, I know. But we'll think of something.

GRAN
 I can't see what.

GORE
 We always wanted a baby in the family. Now we've got one.

GRAN
 That's all very well, but it might be nice if it were related.

GORE
 It is related. To you *and* to me.

GRAN
 So it is. It's a tragedy for you too.

GORE
 It is not a tragedy. It is a situation. It is something that can be worked through.

GRAN
 It would be a tragedy if Cotton and Vicki split up. For all of us. What would happen to the farm?

GORE
 Let's not get ahead of ourselves. This has happened. It's simply a matter of where we go from here.

GRAN
 Where do we go from here?

GORE
 First, I need to pack Josh off back to the States.

GRAN
 But shouldn't he step up?

GORE
 How? He's 19. It obviously didn't mean anything. Now this has happened and we have to deal with it. I have to deal with it.

GRAN
 I don't see why.

GORE

He's my nephew. I'm the reason he's here. I will take responsibility for my family.

GRAN

And the child?

GORE

We just carry on.

GRAN

You can hardly expect Cotton to raise it as his.

GORE

Why not?

GRAN

But he'd always know.

GORE

Cotton can't have children. It's no different from having a donor.

GRAN

A turkey baster would have been better.

GORE

Okay, so the circumstances are a bit murky, but it amounts to the same thing.

GRAN

Does it?

GORE

Cotton just needs time to come around to the idea. I'm not saying it won't be difficult, but we can get through this.

GRAN

If I were in his situation, you wouldn't see me for dust.

GORE

He's not going anywhere. Not if I have anything to do with it. This child will be my great-nephew. He will be John's great-nephew.

GRAN

The whole idea is ridiculous.

GORE

Is it? Who knows, your face lit up at the idea of being a great-grandmother. Your granddaughter and namesake. And now your great-granddaughter, perhaps? Don't pretend that thought wouldn't send you to your grave happy.

GRAN

You know, I pride myself on taking a liberal view. Ever since... Well, it wasn't easy. It was a shock. And the comments. Knowing what people were saying. But I kept

my back straight and my head held high. Lord knows, I didn't understand it. But I stuck by my son and...

GORE

What's so different now? We're a family. And families get through things.

GRAN

But would it be such a bad thing if once – just once – one of you did something the conventional way?

GORE

How very dull your life would be.

GRAN

Dull, indeed.

SCENE 11 - THEN

Saturday 19 June 1993. Late afternoon. Town hall.

Final preparations are being made for the ball that evening. John enters half carrying, half dragging a ladder. Cotton enters. He is dressed for the ball, but still in shirt sleeves.

COTTON

Hey, mate. Let me help you with that.

He helps John set up the ladder underneath the stag's head, but is careful not to take over. He holds it steady while John climbs up. John pulls a rag from his pocket and swipes at the stag's head.

JOHN

Only time it gets a good dust.

COTTON

(coughing)

Cheers for that.

JOHN

Grab some of those decorations would you, son? While there are still some left.

Cotton fetches streamers. He hands them up to John and watches as he decorates the stag's head.

Gore says it's tacky. I just do it to razz him up. You've got to have a bit of fun.

It's a great head.

COTTON

Not bad. Got it at Crown Rock too.

JOHN

Why did you stop competing?

COTTON

Better to quit while you're ahead.

JOHN

You reckon?

COTTON

Sooner or later you've got to give the younger blokes a go.

(looking around the hall)

The old hall's seen a few of these occasions.

COTTON

I bet it has.

John climbs down the ladder.

JOHN

(referring to the stag's head)

There's room for another one alongside it. Once you get a few wins under your belt.

COTTON

That would be something.

John busies himself taking down the ladder.

JOHN

It was decent of you.

COTTON

What?

JOHN

To come tonight.

COTTON

I needed time to think.

JOHN

It's been a shock.

Yes.

COTTON

He's gone. He's gone and he's not coming back. Gore's made sure of that.

JOHN

I know.

COTTON

Whatever you decide...[we'll understand].

JOHN

John is struggling with the ladder.
Cotton gently takes charge of it.

Thanks.

COTTON

You need to save your energy for dancing.

JOHN

I'll have plenty of energy for that.

COTTON

John?

JOHN

Son?

COTTON

Kia ora.

Vicki enters carrying Cotton's suit jacket. John notices her first and excuses himself.

JOHN

Well, I'd better make myself presentable. Time's marching on.

John exits. Vicki comes over to Cotton.

VICKI

This was on a chair in the kitchen.

She hands him the jacket which he puts on.

COTTON

Thanks.

(pause)

People will be arriving any minute.

VICKI

All under control?

COTTON

Gran's barking orders. Gore's in a flap.

VICKI

I'm sorry I wasn't around to help.

COTTON

(pause)

So.

VICKI

So.

COTTON

We haven't really had a chance to talk since you got back.

VICKI

No.

COTTON

Cotton fumbles trying to tie his tie.

Here. Let me help.

VICKI

She ties his tie for him.

Did you go out to the hut?

I can never understand how you can do that back to front.

COTTON

(pause)

I guess the judging's done and dusted.

VICKI

Just a waiting game now.

COTTON

I've got everything crossed.

VICKI

It's just a cup. At the end of the day, that's all it is.

COTTON

Vicki finishes tying Cotton's tie.

VICKI
There. Very smart.

(long pause)

COTTON
How many of these things have we been to?

VICKI
A few.

COTTON
Yeah.

(pause)

VICKI
And our wedding dance.

COTTON
Yes. I was more nervous of that first dance than getting hitched. Everyone watching. Gore's voice in my head the whole time. Forward-side-together. Rise and fall.

VICKI
Tonight. You'll dance with me?

COTTON
Of course.

VICKI
It's just that I couldn't bear it. If you didn't dance with me...

COTTON
Of course I'll dance with you.

(long pause)

I've been thinking about Mak. My cousin.

VICKI
I remember.

COTTON
We went hunting together as kids.

VICKI
You used to tell me stories about him. When we first met.

COTTON
He was ace. Man, I wanted to be like him. I wonder what he's doing now. It seems so long ago. All my life, it seems, I've been on the side line. Watching things happen to others.

VICKI

Everyone feels like that. I feel like that sometimes.

COTTON

When will it be my turn, Vic?

VICKI

Tonight. You'll have your name up there on the board and...[your name on the trophy].

COTTON

I can't, Vic.

VICKI

I know.

COTTON

I wish I could, but I can't.

VICKI

(pause)
When?

COTTON

Tonight. After the ball.

(pause)

VICKI

You know how I feel about you. You know that, don't you?

COTTON

You'll be fine.

Vicki and Cotton embrace. Gore enters dressed for the ball.

GORE

Now, there's a sight for sore eyes. Thank God for that. Tempest in a teacup. Soonest said, soonest mended.

He hugs and kisses them both.

I think I'm going to cry. No, I'm not. Haven't time. Haven't time. Thank, God. Thank, God for small mercies.

COTTON

I'd better get this ladder away.

He takes the ladder and exits.

GORE

Don't you look flash?

VICKI

As Gran says, there's no point in being poor and looking poor.

GORE

(glancing at the stag's head)

I can see John's been up to his old tricks.

VICKI

Poor thing. It looks so sad.

GORE

Cheer up old girl. Tonight's going to be extra special. You wait and see.

A band strikes up – a quickstep. Gore invites Vicki to dance. Lighting transition to next scene.

SCENE 12

Saturday 19 June 1993. Town hall.

The ball is well underway. A band is playing. Cotton enters. He shoulder taps Gore and he and Vicki dance.

Saturday 1 June 2013.

Jack enters and looks on. He crosses the stage and shoulder taps Cotton. Cotton gives way politely without any sense of recognition. In the background, John and Gran dance together throughout the following exchange.

JACK

Mum.

VICKI

Jack.

JACK

Are you okay?

VICKI

I'm fine.

JACK

It's hard, isn't it?

VICKI

Yes.

JACK

I remember when I was really little you'd dance with me. You'd be all dressed up for the ball. Gore fussing over Uncle John's tie. And you looked beautiful. Your hair all done up and sparkles and shit. And I would, like, bow. And ask you if you wanted to dance. Just like Gore taught me. And you would say, 'I'd be delighted'. And I would, like, stand on your feet and you would dance me around the living room.

VICKI

Would you dance with me now?

Jack takes her in his arms. They dance.

There are things I never told you.

JACK

I guessed as much.

VICKI

When you're in America. You have family there. Gore's family. Your family.

JACK

I'd like to meet him.

VICKI

Some things are so big. You can't take them back. No matter how much you want to.

JACK

Did you ever dance with my father?

VICKI

I wouldn't be without you, Jack.

They continue dancing.

*Saturday 19 June 1993. Late evening.
Town hall.*

The song finishes, Gore – as MC – picks up a microphone.

GORE

Ladies and gentlemen, may I suggest you take your seats while the band takes a short break. The bar's still open if you need to wet your whistle.

John comes up to Gore and has a word in his ear.

Strike that. Looks like it's supper time. But first, let me present the leading lights behind what I assure you will be a magnificent meal. Ladies and gentlemen. The

convenor of the Catering Committee of the AAW – long may she reign – Mrs Victoria Gordon.

Applause. Gran enters wearing a pinny over her dress.

GRAN

Oh, for goodness sake! I haven't got time for this nonsense. Everything will be ruined.

She takes a bow.

GORE

Tēnā koutou. Of course, what would supper at the Deerstalkers' Ball be without that splendid tradition – the venison casserole? So without further ado let me introduce the creator of this year's culinary masterpiece. Please put your hands together for my very talented niece – I taught her everything she knows – Mrs Cotton Tarawhiti!

Vicki steps forward. Applause.

Gentlemen, please take your partners for the supper waltz.

The band strikes up again, this time playing the same song from scene 1.

Vicki and John dance together.

JOHN

(to Vicki)

I don't know if I can manage another one.

VICKI

(to John)

We can sit it out if you like.

JOHN

(to Vicki)

I'll manage.

Gore and Gran dance together.

GORE

(to Gran)

You have to dance this with me.

GRAN

(to Gore)

I haven't time. I should be seeing to the supper.

GORE

(to Gran)

But it's my song. You can't leave me now.

GRAN

(to Gore)

It's not you they'll blame if the supper's ruined.

GORE

(to Gran)

It'll be a triumph. It always is.

VICKI

(to John)

Did you see where Cotton went?

JOHN

(to Vicki)

He'll be at the bar. Drinking out of his trophy.

VICKI

(to John)

The trophy's on our table. He's left it behind.

(to herself)

Haere ra.

GORE

(to Gran)

Another chance slips quietly by.

GRAN

(to Gore)

What do you mean?

GORE

(to Gran)

It doesn't matter.

GRAN

(after a moment, to Gore)

Yes, it does.

GORE

(to Gran)

He'd never agree.

GRAN

(to Gore)

You leave him to me.

JOHN

(to Vicki)

You know we'll look after you.

	VICKI
(to John)	
We'll look after each other.	
	The couples 'shoulder tap' and swap partners.
	GRAN
(to John)	
All he wants is to dance this dance with you.	
	JOHN
(to Gran)	
I know.	
	GRAN
(to John)	
Well?	
	JOHN
(to Gran)	
You've changed your tune.	
	VICKI
(to Gore)	
This is your chance.	
	GORE
(to Vicki)	
Who knows how many more we'll have.	
	GRAN
(to John)	
He's been dropping hints for years.	
	JOHN
(to Gran)	
He has.	
	GORE
(to Vicki)	
Do you think I dare?	
	VICKI
(to Gore)	
At this stage of the night, everyone's too cut to care.	
	GORE
(to Vicki)	
I don't know.	

VICKI

(to Gore)
They'd applaud anything.

GRAN

(to John)
I didn't understand. Not before. But now I think I do.

JOHN

(to Gran)
What would people think?

GRAN

(to John)
After all these years? Does it really matter?

VICKI

(to Gore)
Well then?

GORE

(to Vicki)
It's now or never.

GRAN

(to John)
Well then?

John still isn't having a bar of it.

GRAN

(to John)
For goodness sake, John. It is the 1990s.

The couples draw closer. Gore 'shoulder taps' Gran. This may involve some improvisation, but the essential lines are

JOHN

What are you doing?

GORE

I'm cutting in.

JOHN

You can't.

GORE

Didn't you know? It's the 'Ladies Excuse Me'.

John is torn between creating a scene
and rejecting his partner.

JOHN

Well, if we're going to do this. For Christ's sake let me lead.

John and Gore dance awkwardly at
first and then quite naturally as if it
were nothing new.

Lights fade.

(CURTAIN.)

Laughter through tears

The art of serious comedy

An exegesis

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by

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Introduction

The Deerstalkers' Ball is a family story set in rural Otago. It takes place against the background of preparations for a dance, supervised by Gran, matriarch and convenor of the catering committee. The ball is a longstanding and significant event for the local community. The main narrative takes place over a two-month period in winter 1993. At the centre of the family is a middle-aged gay couple – Gran's son John, a sheep farmer, and his partner Gore. John's niece, Vicki, a nurse, is married to Cotton, who works on the farm. Vicki and Cotton have been unable to have children because Cotton is infertile. Not being able to have a family is an underlying cause of tension in their marriage. Josh – Gore's young American nephew – turns up unexpectedly and sets the cat among the pigeons. Josh and Cotton become mates. At the same time, Josh enters a liaison with Vicki who falls pregnant. The repercussions of this are far-reaching for all members of the family. Gore is keen for Cotton to raise the child as his own and sees it as an opportunity to unite his and John's families. Cotton, however, is unable to forgive Vicki's infidelity and chooses to leave.

Although not explicit in the text, the play is set in West Otago, the small rural community I grew up in. The ball of the title is based on the annual ball held in Tapanui by the Blue Mountains branch of the New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association until the 1980s. After living away from West Otago for about thirty years, I went back to live there in 2009. The play is a response to my observations of what had and had not changed in that community in the intervening years. The characters and basic storyline, however, have a longer history. In 1990, I was awarded a grant from Creative New Zealand (then the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand) to write a novel. It was then I developed the characters of John, Gore, Victoria and Cotton, as well as aspects of the story, including the ball and the idea of an American nephew upsetting the status quo. The project never got past the first few chapters. I found I had no aptitude for prose fiction and the comic tone I was aiming for didn't sit comfortably. I abandoned the project and creative writing altogether. The story stayed with me, however, and at some point I started thinking of it in terms of a play. At the beginning of this MFA project, I had six

characters, a rough idea of a storyline, and a draft of a few short scenes, including the last section of the final scene.

The concept for the play stems logically from the rural-based comedies I wrote in my early twenties. *Twice Around the Garden* (1987) is a fairly sentimental observation of a farming wife/husband relationship. It won the inaugural Aoraki Festival Playwriting Award in 1988, was performed on the opening night of the festival and ran for a short season at a theatre in Timaru. The play had a second production at The Globe in Dunedin in 1989, directed by Karen Elliot, and a radio adaptation was broadcast by Radio New Zealand, also in 1989.

My second full-length play, *Room to Move* (1988), focused on the parent/adult child relationship, this time with a less sympathetic portrayal of the parents. It was given a rehearsed reading at the Fortune Theatre, Dunedin as part of Writers' Week and later produced by a co-operative at the Depot Theatre in Wellington (1989), directed by John McDavitt. Radio New Zealand produced an adaptation in 1991. The play is about a young gay man's attempts to solve the problem of establishing independence from his family while continuing to live on the same property. He moves into the loft above the barn only to be thwarted as, one by one, his parents and sibling move in with him. The fact that he is gay is, however, more of a plot device and is not explored thematically. My intention at the outset of the MFA project was to write a 'gay play' with a rural setting. As the ideas for the play developed, however, I focused more on Vicki and Cotton's story than on John and Gore. It became a play *with*, rather than *about*, gay characters.

The writing process included guidance from a supervisor, Associate-Professor Stuart Young, who acted as dramaturg. This helped shape the first and second drafts in two ways. First, Associate-Professor Young offered a critical response as the play developed. Second, he steered me towards a range of texts he thought might resonate and offer insights into the craft of playwriting. I kept a journal throughout the project, recording my ideas for the play, thoughts on the process and details of my reading and research. This included researching the history of comedy and reading a wide range of plays dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. In many cases, I have been reliant on translations of works by Continental

European writers, which has brought to my attention the challenges inherent in translating humour from one language to another. I have also read a good deal of commentary by editors, critics, translators and, in some cases, the playwrights themselves. This ‘practice as research’ approach has been useful in understanding the nature of, and resolving, a number of problematic aspects of my play.

This exegesis provides an extended discussion of some of those issues that particularly interest me. While the starting point for this project was to examine the process of writing a play, I soon became particularly interested in a question of tone. Was the play, as I intended, a comedy? If so, what type of comedy might it be? The exegesis discusses these questions, examining the characteristics, techniques and heritage of ‘serious comedy’. While much of the exegesis is given over to this investigation of tone, it also looks at some of the specific challenges I have encountered during the writing process, including handling shifting timeframes, advancing serious themes while navigating the balance between comedy and pathos, and learning to harness the power of what *isn't* said in order to give characters, actors and an audience the space they need to ‘inhabit’ the play.

There were other things I grappled with along the way that I have not addressed, such as issues of structure, characterisation and ensuring the accuracy of the world of the play. The structure of the submitted draft, for example, is radically different from the first. Originally, the play opened with a version of the scene that now opens Act II in which it becomes apparent Vicki is pregnant. It was clear this revelation came too soon and addressing this required extensive restructuring and re-plotting. Some of the characters have also changed markedly. In the original story, for example, the character who became Gran was not a family member. I soon realised she needed to be brought into the family unit in order to have sufficient influence and sway. Another challenge was to fit the plot around the factual details of the story. Various plot elements, for example, had to coincide with things as diverse as ‘the roar’ (April), the opening of duck hunting season (first Saturday in May) and the earliest point after conception that a woman might be expected to experience morning sickness (about four weeks). Maintaining the authenticity of the pregnancy and hunting storylines involved considerable research.

I wrote the first draft of *The Deerstalkers' Ball* over a period of six months, starting in March 2012. After a good deal of time spent working to resolve structural and other issues, I rewrote the play extensively, again over a period of about six months. After some further rework, we held a reading of the play with a cast of professional actors in May 2013. I revised the play again based on that reading and feedback from the cast, working particularly on developing the relationship between Vicki and Cotton. A second reading was held in July 2013, this time getting the play 'on its feet' with basic props and staging. This reading was attended by a dozen or so people including staff from the Theatre Studies programme and the Artistic Director of the Fortune Theatre. Some minor revisions led to the version of the play submitted for the MFA. The goal, of course, is to see the play in production and I expect the attendant rehearsal process would provide further opportunities to refine the script.

Chapter 1 – In search of a comic tradition

Serious comedy – particularly where the comedy moves as it does here on the very edge of desolating loss and despair – is appallingly difficult to get right.

– Michael Frayn on *The Cherry Orchard* (xii)

Someone who read the first few draft scenes of my play remarked that it was a “drama” and not a comedy. This surprised me because I had set out to write a comedy and considered this was apparent in the initial scenes. It was clear, if I were to fight my corner, I needed to develop a greater understanding of my comic approach, and where it might sit in the tradition of comedy. I set out to answer the question of whether it might be reasonable to call my play a comedy and, if so, what sort of comedy might it be. Throughout history, classifying plays according to genre has proved problematic, as exemplified most notably with works by William Shakespeare and Anton Chekhov among other great playwrights. My reading focused in particular on comedies by Ivan Turgenev, Chekhov and writers who have followed in their footsteps – playwrights whose work sits on the edge of ‘drama’ and comedy. I have attempted to analyse and define that ‘Chekhovian’ comic sensibility with a view to locating my own work in relation to that tradition.

The word ‘comedy’ is derived from Greek words meaning ‘song of revelry’ (Law et al. 133). As a dramatic form, it traces its origins back to festivals celebrating Dionysius, god of wine and fertility. Comedy developed as a distinct form alongside tragedy and was the principal feature of the second of the four formal Dionysiac festivals held each year (Freedley 8-9). The earliest comedies that survive are those of Aristophanes (c.450-c.380 B.C.): bawdy social and political satires reflecting the freedom of speech made possible by the rise of Athenian democracy (Law et al. 133; Freedley 22).

Appreciating the genre of a play provides context that adds to the meaning and our understanding of the play (Reed 317). The classic generic terms are ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’, with ‘tragicomedy’ sometimes used to classify a play with elements of both (317-318). *The New Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre* defines comedy as “a form of drama distinguished by its humorous content and happy ending” (133).

Tragedy, in direct contrast, is “a form of drama characterized by its serious tone and unhappy ending” (610). Tragicomedy attempts to straddle the two, “capitalizing on the more sensational aspects of tragedy while borrowing the happy ending typical of comedy” (611).

However, categorising plays according to genre has long been problematic. For example, a number of Shakespeare’s plays that don’t fall easily into the categories tragedy, history and comedy are traditionally grouped together under a fourth category, romance. These ‘romances’ – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* – combine elements of tragedy and comedy yet don’t easily fit the definition of ‘tragicomedy’, the first two tending towards comedy and later two towards tragedy (Harbage 391).

Anton Chekhov

Even a playwright’s decision to designate his or her play a comedy or otherwise is not sufficient to settle the question of genre. Most famously, Chekhov’s assertion that *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) is a comedy was immediately challenged by producers of the original production, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, who saw it as a serious drama (Fen 29; Reed 317).

The debate has continued ever since, including among Chekhov’s translators. Elisaveta Fen, for example, sides with Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, saying that Chekhov’s “intention to make it into a ‘light comedy’ cannot be regarded as fulfilled” (32-33). David Magarshack takes the opposite view, seeing the play as conforming to a classical definition of comedy (272). Michael Frayn, who translated the play for the National Theatre in 1978, takes issue with Magarshack saying that “it is truly not possible to read the play in Russian without being moved to tears as well as laughter” (xii). He also makes the point that, for most of the last century, much of the comedy for English-speaking audiences was masked by “bafflingly opaque translations” (xi).

Fen suggests the comic elements in Chekhov’s play are superficial: “Intelligent audiences may laugh at Gayev’s mannerisms, Charlotta’s tricks, and the persistent attempts of the penniless landowner Simeonov-Pishchik to borrow money, but it is doubtful whether they could regard these characters as merely ‘funny’” (32-33).

Vera Gottlieb, however, argues that the comedy runs much deeper. She observes that the comedy in Chekov's plays often lies in the discrepancy between a character's current situation and aspirations – and their lack of action towards bridging the gap (231). A prime example is Ranevskaya's inability to act to save her estate exemplified in the following exchange:

Lopakhin [...] You're told in words of one syllable that your estate is about to be sold and you simply can't grasp it.

Lyubov A But what can we do? Tell us, what?

Lopakhin I tell you every day. Every day I say the same thing over and over again. The cherry orchard and the rest of the land must be leased out for holiday houses. And it must be done now, as soon as possible – the auction's upon us! Get that into your heads! Once you've made that decision, you can get your hands on as much money as you want, and you'll be saved.

Lyubov A Holiday houses and holidaymakers – forgive me, but it's so crass (Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* 24).

Chekhov's comic style has other distinct features. Walter Reed observes that Chekhov plays against both the tragic and comic possibilities of the play. He points out, for example, that while there is considerable pathos in the family's loss of the cherry orchard, "the play as a whole never makes it clear that the cherry orchard is a source of redeeming value and not simply a luxury that the upper classes can no longer afford" (318). At the same time, he says, the play "resists the embrace of comedy as well. Farce in its turn is undercut by pathos" (319), or, as J.L. Styan puts it, "Everyday life is permitted to carry its own message by [Chekhov's] careful adjustment of our critical with our sympathetic faculties throughout the play, balancing laughter and tears" (67).

So if, in *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov plays against both comedy and tragedy in more or less equal measure, what is it that, overall, skews it more strongly towards the comic? There might be a clue in Henri Bergson's observation that laughter is an intellectual response rather than an emotional one:

I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence on our pity (4).

Bergson maintains that, if emotion is set aside, “many a drama will turn into a comedy” (5). This is precisely the case in the exchange between Ranevskaya and Lopakhin quoted above. Lopakhin repeatedly offers Ranevskaya an option which she obtusely fails to grasp. Her refusal to see a way out of her difficulties is maddening but it is also funny. To experience the comic one needs to put aside, at least momentarily, feelings of pity for Ranevskaya’s plight.

In this way, Chekhov uses comedy to prompt his audience to consider his characters and their situation critically rather than simply being swept along by emotion. This is typical of serious comedy which, Styan says, “impels the spectator forward by stimulus to mind or heart, then distracts him, muddles him, so that time and time again he must review his own activity in watching the play” (251). Unfortunately, many productions miss the comedy in Chekhov’s play altogether (Magarshack 264; Frayn xi). As Frayn says, while Chekhov, “seems to be able to inhabit anyone, and to inhabit them completely,” he also, “sees his characters from outside, with entirely un sentimental coolness and irony” (x). This ability to maintain an element of detachment from Chekhov’s characters tips the balance in favour of comedy.

Obviously, Chekhov included the word ‘comedy’ on the title page of *The Cherry Orchard* deliberately. Frayn observes that “some of Chekhov’s references to the play’s comicality have a characteristically teasing or self-mocking air. Serious teasing in the case of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko – he wanted to tease them out of the solemnity he foresaw and deprecated” (xi). Chekhov wasn’t denying the drama inherent in the play; he just didn’t feel he needed to signpost it.

The question then, is what label might be appropriate for such a comic style? Styan uses the phrase “dark comedy” (v). Beth Henley says many of her plays are, “comedies in a dark sense” (Foster 49). Terence Rattigan talks about ‘serious comedy’ as distinct from ‘light comedy’ (xvi). Sean O’Connor, discussing Rattigan’s work, talks about “comedy of character and situation” (141). Frayn also

uses the phrase ‘serious comedy’ to describe *The Cherry Orchard* (xii), and this is the term I have settled on for my play.

Ivan Turgenev

The adjective ‘Chekhovian’ has been ascribed to the work of many playwrights over more than a century. However, Chekhov himself was influenced by fellow Russian writer, Ivan Turgenev, whose play *A Month in the Country* (1848-1850) predates, and is a precursor to, his work.

In his introduction to his translation, Isaiah Berlin notes that the play had a long road to the stage. It was first performed in Moscow in 1872, more than twenty years after it was written. It didn’t become famous until celebrated actress Maria Gavrilovna Savina chose it as a vehicle for her talent and it was produced in St Petersburg in 1879 (8). From there it “gradually entered the theatrical repertoire in every part of the world, and became one of the most admired and frequently acted nineteenth-century plays. Chekhov’s *Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* are its best known direct descendants” (9).

There are a number of parallels between *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Month in the Country*. Turgenev also designated his play a comedy; and again that classification has been disputed by others. Berlin, for example, has difficulty with it (15), as did Stanislavsky, who directed it for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1909 (9-10). However, even in translation, it is apparent from the outset that the play is full of humour:

SCHAAF: Harrds

ANNA SEMYONOVNA: What, again? If you go on like this, dear friend,
that will be the end of us.

SCHAAF *impassively*: Eighdd ov harrds.

ANNA SEMYONOVNA *to Lizaveta Bogdanovna*: Oh lord! It’s impossible to
play with him (21).

The card game continues in this vein throughout the beginning of Act One. There is humour in the contrast of Schaaf’s bored insistence and Anna Semyonovna’s over-

the-top outrage. At the same time, there is a fine balance between comedy and drama. The card game, for example, helps set up the stifling atmosphere Natalya Petrovna refers to later in the scene when she says to Rakitin:

[...] at times, when we are talking together, it's as though we were lace-making... Have you ever seen lace-makers at work? They sit in airless rooms, without moving from their places. Lace is a wonderful thing, but a drink of fresh water on a hot day is better still (23).

The card game is just one of many examples of comedy in Turgenev's play. Others include:

- Shpigelsky's teasing of Bolshintsov as the unlikely suitor frets about meeting and courting Vera (Act Two).
- Shpigelsky's reluctance to admit to Rakitin his motives as matchmaker (beginning of Act Three).
- Shpigelsky's proposal to Lizaveta Bogdanovna (Act Four) in which he pours cold water over her desire for a romantic proposal by offering a frank and bleak description of the married life he is offering (expecting her to be grateful for his honest 'no surprises' approach).
- The 'I know you're a grown man but...' exchange between Anna Semyonovna and her son Islayev at beginning of Act Five.

The humour in these exchanges stems from the personalities of the characters, their interactions and the situations they find themselves in. The play *is* comic. It just doesn't rely for its humour on stock comic characters or funny lines. This is characteristic of serious comedy and something examined in more detail in the following chapter.

Brian Friel

Writers have been drawing inspiration from Chekhov for more than one hundred years, among them British playwright Terence Rattigan (O'Connor 141) and Irish playwright Brian Friel (Tracy 64). (Rattigan's work – especially his writing about writing – has influenced this project a great deal and is addressed in chapter 4.)

Robert Tracy notes that Friel has been called "this Irish Chekhov," saying that "[...]

among contemporary Irish playwrights Friel has perhaps learned the most from Chekhov's themes and techniques, and applied his lessons most subtly" (64). He goes on to describe the similarities between Friel's plays *Living Quarters* (1977) and *Aristocrats* (1979) and, respectively, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901) – which Friel translated in 1979-80 – and *The Cherry Orchard* (67). Interestingly, Friel also created a version of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* (1992).

In serious comedy, the humour often emerges in the playing rather than being obvious on a first reading. *Aristocrats*, for example, reads as a drama but plays out as a comedy: father's booming voice over the baby monitor, Casimir's 'peculiar' behaviour, the pretend croquet game. Once again, the comedy emerges through situation and character rather than comic lines. In a similar vein, much of the comedy in *The Deerstalkers' Ball* emerges more clearly once the words are spoken. There is, for example, humour in Cotton's earnestly practising his stag roar at the end of scene 5, in Vicki's teaching Josh how to use a gun at the end of scene 7, and in John, Gore and Gran's excited anticipation of Vicki's arrival in scene 9. Paul Barrett, who played Gore at the readings, commented that he found the script funnier hearing it out loud than when he first read it and that much of that humour stemmed from the use of irony. (Nonetheless, while noting the humour in the script, Barrett remains convinced that the play is a drama and not a comedy.) The use of irony is explored in the following chapter.

Kevin Elyot

Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* (1994) is an example of a more recent play with a Chekhovian comic sensibility. Although written almost a century after *The Cherry Orchard*, and dealing with very different themes, there are striking similarities between the two. Both plays, for example, are domestic in scale, yet set against wider social and political significance. *The Cherry Orchard* resonates with the stirrings of social and political change in Russia that would lead to the 1917 revolution. *My Night with Reg* is set at the height – at least in Western countries – of the AIDS crisis. Meanwhile both plays feature the use of repetition to establish characters and for comic effect: Bernie's obsession with conservatories in Elyot's play echoes Gayev's obsession with billiards in Chekhov's. Reed observes that the effect is to work against pathos: "As soon as a character gets emotionally worked

up, something ludicrous usually happens to him” (319). While the emotions in each of these plays are very real and genuinely moving, both plays are deeply funny. At the same time, the pivotal events in both plays are tragic. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Grisha’s death and the loss of the orchard cast a long shadow over the world of the play. Loss looms large in *My Night with Reg* with the death of Reg, whom we don’t meet on stage, and Guy, whom we do.

These personal tragedies happen offstage – either before or within the timeframe of the play. This is typical of serious comedy. Other examples are the death of Tuzenbakh in *Three Sisters* and the mother’s suicide in *Aristocrats*. A sense of personal loss is not only characteristic of, but integral to this style of comedy. However, if those events were portrayed onstage, they would overwhelm the delicate balance between comedy and pathos.

In the opening scene in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* it is clear that John and Gran have died in the years between this present-day scene and the main narrative that follows. The sale of the farm also adds to the sense of loss. Someone who attended the reading commented that these events give the opening of the play poignancy more usually found in a final scene. It should also duly help to temper the levity of the final action of the play.

Beth Henley

Foregoing a happy ending in favour of one that is, at best, hopeful is common in serious comedy. At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, the orchard is lost, the family disperses, and the old servant Firs is forgotten and left in the house seemingly to die alone (Fraysn xii).⁹ Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* (1981) provides another example.¹⁰ The story, set in Mississippi, is of a dysfunctional family including three grown-up sisters, one of whom has been arrested for shooting her husband. The play’s ending is typical of the use of irony throughout the play. The eldest sister, Lenny, blows out the candles on her birthday cake and makes a wish, which she explains as a vision of the three sisters “smiling and laughing together”

⁹ Magarshack takes a different view saying there is nothing in Chekhov’s stage directions to support this and that ‘If Chekhov had meant Firs to die, he would have said so’ (285).

¹⁰ Henley’s work has been described as Chekhovian and she is on record saying that, “subliminally, or even consciously, I steal from him” (Foster 47-48).

(124). She warns that that moment will be fleeting: “it wasn’t forever; it wasn’t for every minute. Just this one moment and we were all laughing” (124). It’s clear to the audience as the sisters laugh and share Lenny’s birthday cake that this is that one moment. This knowledge undercuts the idea that, on the surface, the ending is bright and hopeful.

The Deerstalkers’ Ball ends on an upbeat note with the fulfilment of Gore’s wish to dance with John at the ball. Gran and Vicki help facilitate this, adding to the sense that the family has regrouped following the departure of Josh and Cotton. At that moment the family’s future looks hopeful, but the audience will understand that this will change with the deaths of Gran and John.

Robert Lord

Serious comedy is well represented among New Zealand’s dramatic canon. David O’Donnell writes that Roger Hall’s *Middle-Age Spread* (1977) “exposes the wasteland of middle class marriage with sensitivity and an attention to pathos worthy of Chekhov” (18-19). Perhaps more appositely, he also notes that Robert Lord’s plays *Bert & Maisy* (1983) and *Joyful and Triumphant* (1992) follow in this comic tradition. *Bert & Maisy*, for example, presents characters that an audience can empathise with easily while, at the same time, exploiting the humour inherent in their personalities and situation. It is evident from the outset that the play is poignant as well as funny. It opens as Bert brings Tom – a young stranger – home from the railway station. We learn that Bert visits the station regularly in the hope the couple’s estranged son will return. It soon becomes apparent they see in Tom a potential substitute to help fill the void in their lives. There is an underlying sense of sadness in the play, exacerbated by the suffocating atmosphere of family dinners, dull conversations, small lives, the preoccupation with the minutiae of living and keeping up appearances. As in *The Cherry Orchard*, and indeed in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*, attachment to place and the inevitability of change are central themes. The play ends with Bert and Maisy leaving the house Bert has lived in all his life, having been manipulated into making the decision by a scheming niece and her husband. Again, there is no happy ending.

This brief survey of playwrights and plays illustrates a number of things that characterise serious comedy. *The Deerstalkers' Ball* also features these elements, so it is not surprising that its genre is open to debate. It walks a fine line between comedy and pathos. A sense of personal loss pervades the play even though those losses occur off-stage and postdate the main narrative. There is no happy ending. It contains an element of social and political commentary, something discussed in chapter 5. It avoids the stock characters and more obviously contrived situations and plot twists that characterise other types/traditions of comedy ranging from *commedia dell'arte* to farce to satire. The comedy is largely derived from the personalities of the characters, their interactions and the situations they find themselves in. Furthermore, it relies more on the use of irony than on comic lines. These comic techniques and their use are explored further in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 – Playing for laughs

Attending English comedies, I have sometimes been tempted to think: ‘Not the play – the line’s the thing.’

– Carl Zuckmayer (N. pag.)

The previous chapter looks at general characteristics of serious comedy, and particularly at the way it balances comedy and pathos. This chapter looks more closely at specific comic techniques and how they are employed in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*. A sense of comedy is largely intuitive. It’s tempting to think that there are no rules (other than always to put the joke at the end of the line). There is, however, theory behind what makes us laugh, analysed famously by Henri Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911). In this chapter, I use Bergson’s ‘law’ of comedy and his three methods for creating a comic effect as a framework for examining comic techniques used in several well-known serious comedies and in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*. I also examine how the humour in these plays relies on situation and character and the use of irony.

Bergson’s ‘law’ is that “any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement” (69). A good example is scene 8 of *The Captain of Köpenick*, John Mortimer’s 1971 adaptation of Carl Zuckmayer’s *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (1931). In the scene, Mayor Obermüller – a member of the territorials – and his wife are fretting over the late arrival of his new uniform as the deadline looms for him to report for duty. He is forced to try to put on his old uniform, which is too small for him because he has grown too fat. Even his new uniform, when it arrives, fits a little snugly. There is the ‘illusion of life’ in the couple’s bickering and frustration and the “impression of a mechanical arrangement” in the farcical action of repeated dressing and undressing in ill-fitting clothes.

The scene also illustrates that the ‘engine’ of humour in serious comedy is situation and character. The scene relies for its humour on the ridiculousness of the situation, the Mayor’s vanity, and the relationship between husband and wife. It’s an approach to comedy particularly apparent in Chekhov’s farces such as “The Bear”

and “The Proposal”. These works stem from the French tradition of vaudevilles in which the comedy is driven by plot. Chekhov developed the form by creating humorous pieces driven instead by character. In doing so he undermines “the usual themes and sentimentality of traditional vaudeville, in order to question received norms of behaviour” (Whyman 48).

In serious comedy, a character may be witty, like Claire Zachanassian in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit* (1956) or, indeed, Gore in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* whose wit is part of the persona he has adopted; however, the comedy is not propelled by jokes.¹¹ (Of course, in the case of Continental European playwrights such as Chekhov, Dürrenmatt and Zuckmayer, whom I cite, we English-speakers are at the mercy of translators.) It is interesting that English comic writing tends to emphasise verbal humour. Zuckmayer praises Mortimer’s success in conveying the humour of the original but notes there are a few occasions:

where he is overcome by the insatiable appetite of English comedians – and consequently comedy writers – for ‘comic lines’, bounced into the audience and hurled back with roars of laughter. (Attending English comedies, I have sometimes been tempted to think: ‘Not the play – the *line*’s the thing’...) Mr Mortimer feels that there is a lack of such ‘lines’ in my play and I dare say he is right – although German audiences over a span of forty years have laughed, and still laugh, from beginning to end. But this may be provoked more by situations and characters than by lines (n.p.).

What, then, are the techniques used to create the humour typical of serious comedy? Bergson identifies three methods for creating a comic effect. The use of these methods in a play like, for example, *My Night with Reg* illustrates that, while pathos is a feature of serious comedy, it is the underlying comic structure that drives these plays forward.

The first of Bergson’s methods is *repetition*: “... a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life” (90). He illustrates this with the simple ‘real life’ example of

¹¹ Simon O’Connor once observed that a well-known New Zealand writer of comedy “never lets character get in the way of a joke” (qtd. in Young, *some thoughts*).

meeting someone in the street, whom one hasn't seen for a long time, several times in the same day. There is nothing comic in the first occurrence, but the comedy of the coincidence develops with each subsequent meeting (90). *My Night with Reg* provides a clear example of this method in action. The comedy builds in Elyot's play as successive friends confess to Guy that they have had sex with Reg who has died of an AIDS-related illness. Individually, there is considerable pathos in each revelation. The repeating pattern of confessions, however, creates a farce-like comic impression.

Elyot simultaneously uses the method Bergson calls *reciprocal interference of series*: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (96). John is first, for example, to 'confess' to Guy that he is in love with Reg, with whom he is having an affair. At the same time, Guy is trying to tell John that he is the love of his life – and that he has been in love with him since university. John breaks down and Guy misinterprets this, daring to think John is crying because of his feelings for him (103-06). Guy's misunderstanding is sadly comic.

The great irony in *My Night with Reg*, is that Guy, who hasn't had sex with Reg and who is fastidious about safe sex to the extent of resorting to phone sex, dies of AIDS, which he contracted while on holiday in Lanzarote – taken advantage of when he was drunk (99). It is tragic, but it is also an example of Bergson's comic method of *inversion* where the comedy stems from reversing the roles in a given situation (94). In the case of Guy's illness and death, given the promiscuous behaviour of his friends, it's a poignant riff on the "theme of the robber robbed" (95).

Bergson's law and his three methods for creating comic effect are equally evident in *The Deerstalkers' Ball*. In scene 7, Josh urinates on an electric fence and suffers an electric shock. There is the "illusion of life" in Josh's needing to answer the call of nature after a hard night's drinking and several cups of coffee and the "impression of a mechanical arrangement" in that the electric fence has been set up on stage and the audience will presumably anticipate the action (and reaction). Bergson's method of *repetition* drives the comedy in scene 9, the climactic scene in which Vicki's

pregnancy, and the paternity of the baby, is revealed to her husband and family. Here the comedy builds as successive characters jump to the same wrong conclusion, intensifying the misunderstanding. Bergson's *reciprocal interference of series* underscores the humour at the end of the first act. In this scene, Vicki teaches Josh how to shoot a gun. Josh confesses that he has never shot a gun. He also lets it slip that he is a virgin. Vicki teaches him to shoot. The sexual metaphor is intentional and open to "being interpreted in two entirely different meanings". As an aside, the literary joke here is that it is a gender reversal of the scene in Chekhov's farce "The Bear" in which Smirnov teaches Popova how to fire a revolver (14-15). The final action of the play is an example of *inversion*. The significance of, and comedy in, Gore and John's dancing together is the reversal of roles: two men dancing together instead of a man and a woman. This challenges the convention where, in ballroom dancing, the male leads and the female dances backwards. The characters play on this with Gore's referring to himself as the lady ("Didn't you know? It's the 'Ladies Excuse Me'") and John's claiming the male role, saying, "For Christ's sake let me lead" (83).

The comic effects in *My Night with Reg* and *The Deerstalkers' Ball* described here require the audience to be 'in on the act' through the use of irony, which Styan calls, "the chief controlling agent of an audience undergoing a play" (250). The use of irony in all its forms is typical of serious comedy. Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, for example, uses it in a darkly comic way. Early in Act 3, Meg apologises to her sisters Lenny and Babe for having spun Granddaddy a yarn about her successful singing career. She promises to:

[...] go right on over there this morning and tell him the truth. I mean every horrible thing. I don't care if he wants to hear it or not. He's just gonna have to take me like I am. And if he can't take it, if it sends him into a coma, that's just too darn bad (99).

What her sisters – and audience – know, that Meg does not, is that Granddaddy is already in a coma. Lenny and Babe find this hilarious (99-101). The comedy is in Lenny and Babe's reaction. It's also a point of connection between them.

Irony is the principal source of humour in *The Deerstalkers' Ball*. In scene 9, described above, the comedy – and the dramatic tension – stands or falls on the audience understanding more than the characters do. The effect is intended to be simultaneously amusing and uncomfortable as the audience anticipates the revelation that Josh is the father of Vicki's baby. Again, this technique is typical of serious comedy. For example, Henley says, "the humour in [her 2012 play] *The Jacksonian* often comes from a tense tone of foreboding" (Foster 57). The same is true of much of the comedy in *Crimes of the Heart*. It's worth noting here that a number of people have commented that Josh's paternity of the child is too heavily sign-posted. The preceding discussion may go some way to explaining that this is not only intentional but essential to the comedy underlying this pivotal scene.

As well as dramatic irony, the play uses verbal and situational irony for comic effect. There is, for example, a straightforward example of verbal irony in scene three when Gore says he has lost his American accent and that he "blends right in" when patently neither assertion is true (19). There is an example of situational irony towards the end of the play where Gore, walking in on Vicki and Cotton embracing, assumes the couple has reconciled (77).

It is difficult to explain a joke without its humour evaporating; comedy is difficult to pin down. In fact, Bergson prefaces his essay by saying, "we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing" (2). What moves one person to laughter will leave another stoney-faced. Bruce Mason, for example, commenting on the difference between reactions to his play *The End of the Golden Weather* (1960) in New Zealand and at the 1963 Edinburgh Festival, said that, "here audiences laughed at what was familiar; there at what was exotic" (12). There are, however, basic tools for creating comic effect that are universal. In serious comedy, these are often masked by the pathos that pervades the play. Nevertheless, no matter how poignant the story and whatever feelings of compassion the characters in these plays may inspire, the underlying structure is comic.

Chapter 3 – Solving the problem of writing an ‘old play’

My dearest dread is the word “yesterday” in the name of a play; for I know that sometime during the evening I am going to be transported, albeit kicking and screaming, back to the scenes and costumes of a tenderer time.

– Dorothy Parker from a review of A.A. Milne’s *Give Me Yesterday* (437)

Apart from addressing the issue of tone, the first major challenge I faced in writing *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* was resolving the problem of what relevance a story set in the early 1990s might have for a contemporary audience. During my research, I was very much aware of the extent to which plays like *My Night with Reg* and Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (1981) address issues of their day. I realised that essentially I was setting out to write an ‘old play’. This chapter looks at how I addressed this issue. First, I explain my reasoning for not simply updating the story to the present day. Second, I look at a range of plays where the action is set at a time other than the present. I touch on the different structures used and their influence on the final shape of *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*.

The first option I considered was simply to re-locate the story in the present day. Mapping out this option made me realise the story was very much ‘of its time’ and couldn’t easily be updated. There are a number reasons for this and these are worth detailing as they are central to the themes I realised I wanted to explore. First, a country ball featuring ‘old time’ dancing is very much part of a past New Zealand landscape. Up until the late 1960s, dances, often held in church halls, were a mainstay of the social calendar of rural communities. This declined with the change in popular music and dancing styles. Second, over the past 50 years, better roads and vehicles have seen a decline in the fortunes of the small towns that were once the hub of rural communities, such as Tapanui, Heriot and Kelso, in favour of larger service towns, such as Gore and Balclutha.¹² Third, the rise of dairying has changed the rural landscape, bringing a more intensive form of farming. Rising land prices and the huge costs involved in converting farms to dairy has changed the farming business model in favour of sharemilking arrangements which separate land and stock ownership. This has led in turn to a more mobile workforce as workers move

¹² Kelso was abandoned altogether following devastating floods in 1978 and 1980.

from farm to farm, building their herd and working towards farm ownership. The opening line of *The Deerstalkers' Ball* refers to this transience. 'Gypsy day' (1 June) marks the beginning of the new dairy season; this is the day farms change hands and sharemilkers take up new contracts. In addition, with such large sums of money involved, inheritance issues come into play. It is increasingly difficult for a family to finance the next generation into a farm and to provide a retirement income for the parents and some sort of cash pay-out for other children. More farms are being sold out of family ownership into company ownership. These changes have altered the character of rural communities. A transient population has less investment in community. An event like a community dance is less likely to gain sufficient support to make it viable. The changes detailed here made setting the play in the present day difficult without altering the story beyond recognition.

Meanwhile, I realised that what I was interested in recording was a sense of the changes that have taken place in the New Zealand's rural south. I needed to research options for structuring the play in a way that made that possible.

One option was, of course, to continue with my initial plan to write a historic piece set in the early 1990s. There are many precedents for this approach, including Bruce Mason's *The End of the Golden Weather* (1960) and Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983). These two plays have much in common: both are 'coming of age' stories set during the Depression of the 1930s and narrated from the point of view of an adolescent boy. Both plays are about loss of innocence and the main action concerns the events immediately surrounding that point of change. This goes to the heart of why I felt my story required a different approach. While it was also about change, the change I wanted to explore evolved over a period of years. This requires an audience to contrast a contemporary situation with an historic one. Setting the play entirely in the 1990s would leave the audience to 'join the dots' between these two timeframes for themselves, both in terms of the themes of the play and the characters' journeys.

It became clear that my story needed to be anchored in the present even though the main action takes place at an earlier time. Again, there are many precedents for this: Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1948) is a classic example; Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) is another. Both these plays use the device of a

narrator who is also a character in the story. Friel's story, for example, is narrated by Michael Evans, the son of one of five unmarried sisters living in County Donegal, Ireland. Michael, who was 7 at the time of the main action of the play, explains what happened to the characters during the summer of 1936 and in the years since. (The younger Michael is talked about but not seen on stage.) Friel uses this device to pull the threads of the story together and to add a layer of poignancy that would be difficult to achieve without Michael's present-day perspective.

I wanted to create a similar effect where a scene's power is intensified because the audience knows the characters' fate before it plays out. A feature of serious comedy is the dramatist's careful manipulation of the audiences' sympathies, alternating between laughter and tears (Styan 95; 250-251). This is part of the function of the present-day scene that opens *The Deerstalkers' Ball*. As with Friel's use of the narrator, it completes a number of character journeys. The audience learns important facts about what has happened in the years since the main action, including the deaths of John and Gran, and that the farm will eventually be sold out of the family. As well as this sense of loss, the audience gets an idea of how the years have treated Gore and Vicki. The intention is to show a mutual dependence has developed as well as a sense of world-weariness; both characters have lost their spark. The slow tempo of the scene's ending, as Vicki and Gore dance together and leave the farmhouse for the last time, should have an elegiac quality, which is juxtaposed against the obvious comedy and bright tempo of scene 2. My intention with the second scene is to work against the pathos of the first while at the same time moderating the change of tone by instilling a sense that the story won't end happily.

Although I was clear I wanted to use two timeframes, I was less certain about employing the device of a narrator. I turned my attention to plays with action spanning a number of years in which none of the characters 'breaks the fourth wall'. Of the many examples of this approach, Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain* (1997) proved particularly instructive. In Greenberg's play, the action is evenly divided between two time periods: the present day and 1960. The first act has three characters: Walker, his sister Nan and their childhood friend, Pip. The action takes place on the day the trio meet for the reading of Walker and Nan's father's will.

Their father, Ned, was a famous architect and business partner of Pip's father, Theo. In the second act, set in 1960, the same three actors play the parents of their first-act characters: Ned, Lina and Theo. The structure of the play means the audience has knowledge the characters in Act II do not have at the time (for example, that Theo will die young). Meanwhile, the children's understanding of events is very different from what actually occurred; Michael Billington makes the point that the "way we misinterpret the past" is a central theme of the play. The play's structure also "neatly counterpoints the innocent optimism of the early 60s with the self-absorption of the neurotic 90s" (Billington). These aspects of Greenberg's play resonated with me and so proved helpful in structuring my play. In addition to using two timeframes to expand the themes of the play, *The Deerstalkers' Ball* uses the device of the same actor playing father and son at the same age. The opening scene introduces the character of Vicki and Josh's son, Jack. Having Jack appear onstage – witty, capable and caring – makes his existence concrete rather than abstract. It makes it clear that, for all but Cotton, he does indeed become the important and much loved addition to the family they had hoped for. He doesn't, however, fulfil their wish to see the farm remain in the family. At the end of the play Vicki tells Jack that she wouldn't be without him. The point is, of course, that the decisions one makes in life change our path. Decisions, good and bad, have consequences, good and bad. While we may have regrets, we often come to a point where we wouldn't change the past even if we could. Vicki may regret her liaison with Josh, but would she, in hindsight, change that, given that Jack was the direct result?

Interweaving characters from different time periods into the action is another effective device. Tom Stoppard uses it in the final scene of *Arcadia* (1993). The action in this play spans 180 years with scenes set in the present day interspersed with scenes set between 1809-1812. The play's final scene brings together characters from both periods. *The Deerstalkers' Ball* does the same. The first complete draft of the play had the main narrative 'bookended' by single present-day scenes. The first scene remains. The final scene was too short and not a natural end point in terms of tone. The solution was to fold it into the ball scene that now ends the play. This scene now shifts between the two timeframes with Jack's appearance at the ball.

Plays like David Hare's *Plenty* (1978) and Andrew Bovell's *When the Rain Stops Falling* (2008) use shifting timeframes to add to the mystery and intrigue of the unfolding story as well as to explore themes. *Plenty*'s main character, Susan, is an Englishwoman active in the French Resistance during World War II. The play contrasts the excitement and fulfilment of her wartime years with her boredom and dissatisfaction with her life since. The play begins with a short scene set in 1962. Its meaning is not immediately clear and doesn't become so until the same scene picks up again towards the end of the play. The action then moves back to the war before following Susan's post wartime life chronologically from 1947 until 1962. The final scene flashes back to 1944. This shifting timeframe is not always defined clearly which adds to the mystery of the play: the audience is left to piece it all together as they go along. Andrew Bovell achieves a similar effect in *When the Rain Stops Falling* (2008). Here, the action of the play shifts among the past, present and future. The story takes place between 1959 and 2039 and is told in non-linear fashion. The shifting timeframe is easy to follow reading the play because the dates are given with each new scene/location. This would be less clear in performance although sometimes Bovell provides a clue in the text: "I was reading. As I do before bed. A history. *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire 1975–2015*" (1). The need to piece the puzzle together helps maintain the suspense and intrigue leading to a satisfying pay-off when the threads of the story, including its many coincidences, come together in the final scene.

In writing the new opening scene of *The Deerstalkers' Ball*, I was aware that, in contrast to *Plenty* and *When the Rain Stops Falling*, I was attempting a dramatic structure where the end is clear at the beginning. To some extent, the play is an experiment in maintaining dramatic tension and momentum having essentially 'given the game away'. As Simon O'Connor, who read the role of John in the two readings of the play, noted "the resolution scene is right at the start. So it's clear that this is not going to be a 'what will happen next' sort of play but rather a 'what happened back then' play". This approach is more akin to Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* (1978), about an extramarital affair, which is structured more or less in reverse chronological order beginning in the present when the affair is over and ending in 1968 when it first began. In Pinter's play, the outcome is clear from the beginning; the pull of the story is in how that point was arrived at. The advantage, for me, in

choosing this dramatic structure is the potential for pathos and the comic possibilities it created.

The present-day scenes function in other ways too. Someone who read the second draft of the play commented that there needed to be a greater sense of the family's attachment to the farm. However, it didn't ring true when I tried to reflect this in the scenes set in 1993. Although Vicki talks about the farm 'going under' in Act I, I don't think she can envisage it actually happening. Therefore, it didn't feel right to have her talk about her deep connection to the farm. It did feel right, however, to add this into the opening scene. My view is that most of us take the here and now for granted and it's only when we're faced with losing something we value that our feelings turn to sentiment. The sense of appreciating what one has only on the point of losing it is also evident in scene 11 when it becomes clear to John and Vicki that Cotton is going to leave. As Ranevskaya says at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, "It's as if I've never really seen the walls and ceilings in this house, and now I'm looking at them insatiably, with such tender love" (55).

Returning to an old project raised issues I realised I needed to address. This was a turning point in the play's development. My research inspired ideas for recalibrating *The Deerstalkers' Ball* using two timeframes to exploit the potential for irony and commentary inherent in this structure. It helped to provide a poignant counterpoint to balance the comedy that pervades the main narrative. It forced me to consider in a concrete rather than an abstract way the point of the story, and this in turn helped focus the writing process. Importantly, the introduction of the present-day scenes opened up new possibilities for articulating themes around change that I discuss more fully in chapter 5.

Chapter 4 – Words left unspoken

TUZENBAKH Say something to me.

IRINA What? What is there to say? What?

TUZENBAKH Anything.

– Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (62)

One of the most important lessons I learned during this project is the crucial role of subtext. I also learned that subtext doesn't write itself. This chapter looks at observations by Rattigan and others that helped me understand the significance of this aspect of the playwright's craft. I also provide examples of how this understanding influenced my reworking of the initial draft of *The Deerstalkers' Ball*.

'Elliptical' is a word that crops up frequently in descriptions of plays studied as part of this project. Murray Bramwell, for example, describes *When the Rain Stops Falling* as "plainly written but ... also instinctive and subtly elliptical" (xvii). John Edmunds, introducing his translations of García Lorca's plays, says:

If translations of plays differ, it is in part because dramatic dialogue is, by its nature, elliptic. A translator, just like an actor, has to work out the subtext, that is, the unspoken thoughts and feelings which give rise to what is spoken – either to reveal or to conceal. Translators, like actors, will make differing judgements in this area, and their conclusions will colour their interpretations (Edmunds n.p.).

Rattigan calls the use of subtext "that strange, almost mystical element in the craft of playwriting known as 'sense of theatre'" (xvii-xviii):

Sense of theatre does not lie in the explicit. An analysis of those moments in the great plays at which we have all caught our breaths would surely lead to the conclusion that they are nearly always those moments when the least is being said, and the most suggested. 'As kill a King?...Ay Lady 'twas my word.' 'She'll come no more. Never, never, never, never, never.' 'Finish, good lady, the bright day is done and we are for the dark.' 'Cover her face:

Mine eyes dazzle: she died young.’ ‘Mother, give me the sun.’ One can multiply instances, but surely the point is here.

Has not sense of theatre then something to do with the ability to thrill an audience by the mere power of suggestion, to move it by words unspoken, rather than spoken, to gain tears by a simple adverb repeated five times or in terms of comedy to arouse laughter by a glance or a nod? Surely, in comedy as in tragedy, it is the implicit rather than the explicit that gives life to a scene and, by demanding the collaboration of the audience, holds it, contented, flattered, alert and responsive (xix-xx)

Rattigan goes on to observe that the “most vital problems” a playwright has to solve are “what *not* to have your actors say, and how best to have them *not* say it” (xx-xxi). These observations brought to mind something Fen wrote about *Three Sisters*: “There are perhaps few scenes so moving in the whole of modern drama as the one between Toozenbah and Irena before his duel, when they utterly fail to put into words the anxiety and longing which torment them” (32).

In the first draft of *The Deerstalkers’ Ball*, the ‘mai mai’ scene between Vicki and Josh that ends Act I was much longer than it is now: tracing the seduction through to its logical conclusion, it ended with Vicki and Josh making out to the sound of distant gunfire. My attempts to plot the development of their liaison so meticulously proved ponderous and dull. Also in that draft, what is now scene 9 ends not with Cotton leaving but with a heated argument between Cotton and Vicki. Again, neither the argument itself nor arguing in front of the rest of the family rang true. It was also problematic dramatically. My supervisor noted:

[t]here needs to be time, I think, for C[otton] to unravel, to respond to the devastating betrayal [...]; it might be good for the audience to wonder for some time how this will pan out? V[icki] has betrayed him – that betrayal is more significant to him than her, although she’s well aware of the impact it will have on him. She deeply regrets the mistake, but for him something is broken forever (Young, *part 2*).

I realised these passages were simply too explicit, leaving nothing to the imagination. In addition, the change of tone worked against the comic style. The

challenge was to learn the inherent power of not hitting things head on. For reasons explained in a previous chapter, it was important, when Vicki's pregnancy is revealed, that the audience understands Josh is the father. This knowledge sustains the comedy and pathos of much of the second act. How to achieve this then, without showing the seduction on stage? The solution came in the form of a gun.

In scene 3, Josh tells the family he has been hunting before, but he doesn't make it clear he has never fired a gun. Naturally, he doesn't want to admit his lack of experience to strangers. In scene 6, however, he clarifies the situation to Cotton. This demonstrates (as does Cotton's sharing a story from his childhood) that they have achieved a level of mateship. Josh is forced to make the same admission to Vicki in the 'mai mai' scene (scene 7) because it is obvious he doesn't know how to load a gun. The sequence of events leads to an increasing intimacy between Vicki and Josh. First, Josh electrocutes himself when he urinates on the electric fence. The discussion of the possibility of damage to his nether regions leads to his confessing his virginity. Finally, he confesses he has never shot a gun. Vicki shows him how to load and fire it. This brings them together into close physical proximity, creating a further degree of intimacy and a clear sexual metaphor. How clear depends on the choices made by the actors playing the scene. The first act ends with the sound of the gun firing. The rest can be left to the audience's imagination.

I took a similar abridging approach to rewriting scene 9, axing the argument between Vicki and Cotton. In the final draft, they broach the issue of Vicki's infidelity after both have had time to reflect. It occurred to me that the decision scene (scene 11) between Cotton and John, and later Cotton and Vicki, had the potential to exemplify Rattigan's 'sense of theatre'. This is a scene with characters who want desperately to talk about something. The trick was to have them talk about something else. The scene takes place on the afternoon of the ball as the final preparations take place. It opens with an exchange between John and Cotton. While on the surface the discussion is about hunting, it's actually about the future of the farm. John is up a ladder decorating a stag's head (ironically, with the streamers Josh helped to make earlier in the play). It is the first time the men have seen each other in the two weeks since the revelation that Josh is the father of Vicki's child. (Cotton has taken time out to think, spending the time at a hunters' hut in the

mountains.) The exchange shows the strength of the bond between the two. In an indirect way, John makes it known that he is ready to step aside and let Cotton take over the farm. The dialogue has John referring to the stag's head, but the offer is clear:

COTTON

It's a great head.

JOHN

Not bad. Got it at Crown Rock too.

COTTON

Why did you stop competing?

JOHN

Better to quit while you're ahead.

COTTON

You reckon?

JOHN

Sooner or later you've got to give the younger blokes a go.

[...]

(referring to the stag's head)

There's room for another one alongside it. Once you get a few wins under your belt.

COTTON

That would be something (72-73).

In this last line, Cotton acknowledges John's offer. It is the same response he gives in scene 3 when Vicki talks about the farm one day being theirs (15). This sequence is important as it makes it clear that John sees Cotton as family of equal standing with Vicki, his blood relation. The farm is Cotton's for the taking. The decision is his. While neither character wants to broach the subject of the farm directly, John is

pleading for Cotton to stay. At the same time he doesn't want to put him on the spot. The exchange ends with John naming Cotton as heir ("Son?") and, again, Cotton acknowledging John's offer ("Kia ora") (74).

John takes his leave when Vicki enters. Again, in the exchange that follows, the characters talk around the subject. Vicki regrets what has happened but is unable to verbalise this. The act of tying Cotton's tie is the closest she comes to expressing her feelings for him until after he reveals his decision. She hints that reconciliation is possible:

VICKI

Tonight. You'll dance with me?

COTTON

Of course.

VICKI

It's just that I couldn't bear it. If you didn't dance with me...

COTTON

Of course I'll dance with you (76).

This sequence was particularly challenging to write. I tried to be aware of the thinking behind, and effect of, every word as the two characters inch towards the realisation that neither is able to prevent the inevitable. Both of them hope against hope that the other will say something that will make a different outcome possible. Ultimately, though, Cotton realises that Vicki's betrayal is too great. It is his decision to end the marriage and leave.

The process of research and rewriting helped me achieve subtext and understatement. It helped me decide which parts of the story to present on stage and which ones to leave to the audience's imagination. I learned that it is not necessary, or desirable, to hit all the emotional high points and that there is much more emotional power, for example, in Vicki and Cotton not being able to articulate their feelings than in their having a heated row. Reworking these scenes has strengthened their comic and dramatic structure. It has given a director, a designer and actors

subtext to work with that allows them to fill in the gaps from their own experience. It creates space for them, and for an audience, to inhabit the play.

Chapter 5 – Saying what you want to say

The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say.

– Virginia Woolf (qtd. in Neale 143)

The Deerstalkers' Ball creates a small universe: a small story set in a small town that relies for its effect on trifling observations of human nature and the idiosyncrasies of its characters. In spite of this, I hope the story has wide appeal. Elyot observes that “[a] play can create the tiniest, most esoteric world and if it’s well enough done I think it will resonate with no problem” (Ravenhill, Elyot and Gaminara 51). The ‘miniaturist’ approach I have taken is deliberate. Hilary Halba describes Robert Lord’s skill at using the “‘small’ universes” of his plays to explore wider social issues (35-36).¹³ I have attempted something similar. The play is a study of a family who are to some degree outsiders in a community where the dominant culture is Kiwi, pākehā, male and heterosexual. It covers a twenty-year period in which many rural communities have undergone significant social and economic transformation due to the decline of sheep farming and the ascent of dairy. Thematically, the play is an observation of change, and resistance to change, with particular reference to attitudes towards women, Māori and gay men.

Serious comedy typically includes an element of socio-political observation and commentary. In the domestic dramas I have studied, I have been struck by the interplay between the ‘smaller’ story unfolding on stage and the wider social context. In an earlier chapter, I mention the socio-political background to *The Cherry Orchard* and *My Night with Reg*. There are many other examples. In his introduction to his translation of *A Month in the Country*, Berlin observes that “like all other Russian writers of any stature in the mid nineteenth century, [Turgenev] was profoundly concerned with the condition of his country” (Berlin 10). Similarly, Friel’s work since the late 1960s is set against the social and political upheaval in his Northern Ireland homeland. Seamus Deane, introducing a collection of Friel’s plays, links the domestic dramas *Living Quarters* (1977) and *Aristocrats* (1979)

¹³ Tony award-winning director Jack Hofsis described Robert Lord, “as a ‘miniaturist’ – creating ‘a little world, but...a complete world’” (Halba 35).

with works that address the conflict directly: “all of these plays have in common an interest in the disintegration of traditional authority and in the exposure of the violence upon which it had rested” (17).

Reading these plays and other serious comedies, such as *Torch Song Trilogy* and Rattigan’s *The Winslow Boy* (1946), helped to crystallise my sense of what my play was about – and to understand consciously rather than subconsciously that it was, indeed, *about* something. It became important for me to develop my play thematically. However, I must make it clear I realise the social context of my story is ‘small beer’ next to social unrest in Russia, the Irish conflict or the AIDS crisis. The point I want to make is not about importance or scale; it’s simply that the play is informed by social and political ideas.

Styan describes *The Cherry Orchard* as “a play which represents an attitude to life under stress and a way of life in transition” (95). *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* has a similar focus. It looks back to a rural way of life that, in many ways, has changed markedly over the past twenty years, due in part to the economic and social impact of dairy farming. The play presents a view of what has and has not changed. Some of these changes might be regarded as positive and others less so. As discussed in chapter 3, the increasing dominance of dairy farming has changed the rural lifestyle as well as the landscape. The huge cost of land, stock, sheds and equipment has put a strain on the traditional model of the family farm. Corporate farms are replacing family farms as families struggle to cope with funding and inheritance issues. The sharemilking business model has largely separated land and stock ownership. For these reasons, rural populations have become increasingly mobile which means people are less likely to put down roots in a community and involve themselves in local issues and events. This has a big impact in rural areas which are particularly reliant on community involvement. Fire and ambulance services, for example, are usually provided by volunteers. The sense of community I remember from my childhood and adolescence appears diluted. When I returned to West Otago to live I noticed that most businesses in Tapanui and Gore have a sign posted in their window with a version of the same message: ‘take off your muddy boots’. That this is necessary is indicative of a change of attitude: a lack of respect for people and property.

At the same time, not all the changes I observed are negative. A more transient population, for example, has challenged the traditional social order. Landowning families, particularly those who have been in a district for a number of generations, like the Gordon family in the play, would traditionally have held high status. I think this sense of birth right is less prevalent today. People who are simply ‘passing through’ are less likely to be concerned about who is at the top of the social tree.

There has also been a change in the status of women. The role of farmer is traditionally seen as male, so the contribution of women’s labour to running a farm has gone unrecognised (Campbell and Bell 540). The rise of dairying has done a great deal to change this. Women are respected as equal partners. These days, for example, most of the participants in the annual New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards are couples. Vicki is in a sense a pioneer. Scene 1 makes it clear that Gore has also stepped up to help with the farm, but there is a suggestion that his role has been subordinate to Vicki’s. Taking on the farm in her own right would be unusual today, let alone in the mid-1990s.

While, in some ways, *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* presents a romantic and nostalgic view of New Zealand rural life, there are darker themes that lurk behind the good-natured hunting expeditions, old-time dancing, and competitive catering. I think the least controversial of these is likely to be the relationship between John and Gore. I found David Geary’s account of the story behind the character, Dawn, the transsexual rousie in his play *The Learner’s Stand* (1995), instructive. Introducing the play, he says, “I’ve always maintained that although New Zealand does have its share of rednecks, it’s actually very accepting of diversity and eccentricity of all kinds; everyone does get a fair go, so long as they don’t scare the chickens” (102).

This is consistent with my own experience and observations living as an openly gay man in a small rural town. I found that (more or less) openly gay men interact with and are largely accepted by the community; however, I think there are ‘rules’ to this acceptance summed up neatly by Geary’s exhortation, “don’t scare the chickens.” Not making waves comes at a cost. Judith Butler argues that gender is a performance and “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (139). The same could be said of sexual identity. Gore and John’s relationship is modelled along the lines of a traditional heterosexual couple, with John the hunter and Gore

the homemaker. In my mind, this is an approach they have adopted, at least publicly, to make their relationship more acceptable. It is in a sense a performance and one which they vary from only slightly when they are alone together.¹⁴

John is in the early stages of congestive heart failure. The plot requires John to be less physically capable than he once was. For example, the storyline requires that he is unable to take part in the hunting expeditions with Cotton and Josh. Obviously, I could have chosen any number of health issues and not necessarily one that was life limiting. I chose it, in part, because it's a disease an audience can relate to easily. It is prevalent in western cultures with around 10% of the population aged over 65 years suffering from it (Maureen Metzger 1). Unlike AIDS, it is not a disease that people can dismiss easily as something that happens to somebody else. John's illness provides an opportunity to show that preoccupations and concerns of two people in a relationship can be universal – gay or straight. The limitations caused by John's illness make him irritable. There should be a sense that his personality has changed somewhat as the illness has taken its toll. Metzger says heart failure is a progressive disease, with a 5-year mortality rate over 50% (1). John and his family know his prognosis is poor. Gore's concern manifests itself in bullying and fussing which grates on John. Gore copes by remembering John as he used to be ("To me, you'll always be that gorgeous man in a pickup" (12)) and holding onto a romantic fantasy that one day they will dance together as a couple at the ball.

John's and Gore's places in the family and community, however, are not defined by John's illness. Gore works harder than John to follow the rules, partly because he craves acceptance and is a more social creature. Ultimately, he wants his status as John's partner to be recognised and accepted. John is more self-contained and has an ace up his sleeve when it comes to 'belonging'. He is both a landowner and has deep family connections within the district. To a large extent, he is accepted because of his lineage, despite being gay. The word 'gay' in this last sentence could be substituted with 'mad', 'alcoholic' or 'married to a Maori' (sic) and the sentiment would still hold true.

¹⁴ This idea of performance is a feature of Robert Lord's work. Hilary Halba writes that, "[m]any of the characters in [Lord's] plays perform themselves in some way, or at the very least, change the complexion of what they say depending upon who they are speaking to" (35).

This brings me to a disturbing theme. Cotton's inclusion in my play is a response to the prejudice against Māori I witnessed growing up in an almost exclusively pākehā community and my dismay at discovering little had changed when I went back to live in that same community. Cotton and Victoria's relationship is as unconventional in this setting as a gay relationship. Cotton's use of Te Reo is, in a way, more confronting. It is a gentle but insistent protest, forcing people, who might prefer to ignore the fact, to acknowledge he is Māori. There is an echo of this in the final scene when Gore as MC chooses to use Te Reo. As ludicrous as it sounds, this would make many people in the community I grew up in, including some family, uncomfortable even today – much more so twenty years ago. In the same way, John and Gore dancing together is an act that is deliberately political and provocative.

While *The Deerstalkers' Ball* is set against a background of social change in rural Otago, this is the backdrop to the tale, not the tale itself (just as Rattigan's *French without Tears* (1936) is not a play about learning French). The story is principally about the failure of Cotton and Victoria's marriage and the impact that has on the family. In telling the story, I have 'made space' to make observations about aspects of human nature that interest me. Hilary Halba, who read the role of Vicki, observed, for example, that the other characters project onto Josh what *they* want him to be, rather like Kathy and Ed in Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964). In Orton's play, Kathy sees Mr Sloane as a child in need of a mother's love – she projects onto him her need for emotional security and desire for a child. Her brother Ed sees him as an innocent led astray by women and in need of structure and discipline – projecting his desire to recapture the camaraderie of boyhood mates. And, of course, both lust after him. Only their father Kemp sees him for the thug he is. This willingness to see others as we would like them to be is precisely the idea I set out to explore as evidenced by this extract from my journal:

Tuesday 20 November 2012

I remember from school, when a new kid joined the class, people wanted to be his or her friend. There was a novelty about them and no baggage – a freshly-minted, perfect person without fault or favour on whom you could project your ideal. It lasts all of five minutes. But another new person comes along and there we go again – femtosecond brain – off projecting our ideal

only to be disappointed yet again. I've seen it in the workplace – that's why the internal applicant is disadvantaged. The new face doesn't come with baggage or faults. And, of course, I've seen and experienced it in new relationships.

So, I'm wondering if Josh is thrust into this impossible situation. The great white hope... The child Gore has always wanted to parent. The grandson Gran never had. The sexy, uncomplicated, dangerous fling Vicki thinks she wants. The buddy/younger brother Cotton misses. Only John – with his unerring intuition – remains wary.

...And in Act 2, as Josh's star fades rather abruptly, he is usurped by his unborn child as everybody pins their hopes and dreams on the baby that will be Jack. Here we go again.

At the reading someone questioned why John takes an instant dislike to Josh. After thinking it through, I decided it doesn't need to be explained. His taking a dislike to Josh is no more irrational or implausible than the other characters' taking an instant 'like' to him. We all judge a book by its cover not least based on attractiveness. And, perversely, it's possible to dislike someone *because* of their attractiveness, especially when one is edging past one's prime. For me, John's line, "reminds me how old I am," rings true (12).

Another idea I set out to explore is the fragility of seemingly solid relationships. There is a parallel between the eventual loss of the farm and the failure of Cotton and Vicki's marriage. Simon O'Connor sees the play "as an unravelling of relationships":

The key element then is the relationship of a family to its farm and to the tradition of the deerstalkers' ball. We get the sense in the first scene that that relationship has been broken – it's a thing of the past, its artefacts are being cleared away and the family home has been emptied... As the play progresses we see how the 'outside' world (including the American foreigners) insinuated itself into the fabric of the family and – unwittingly, blindly, not maliciously – prised it apart.

Of course the fabric was already weak anyway, as we come to realise. Gran is old, John is sick, Vicky is dissatisfied, Cotton is infertile, Gore is impatient for John to publicly and naturally acknowledge their relationship. The farm itself is struggling. Even the venison is harder to come by. Everything is ripe for change and if Josh had not turned up it feels likely that Vicki and Cotton would have become unglued somehow.

The ties that bind can be surprisingly weak. One wrong move can see the closest relationship quickly unravel. I would suggest the consequences of Vicki's infidelity far outweigh the seriousness of the transgression. Nevertheless, it puts the structure of what might be called the 'house of Gordon' at risk. The mai mai Cotton and Josh build on stage is a metaphor for this. It is a temporary structure designed to provide shelter and camouflage (some mai mai are made simply of bales of straw). A mai mai is typically covered with greenery which in a short space of time withers and dies. In the play, the hut is protected by a single strand electric fence: a flimsy defence of an already weak structure.

The breakdown of Cotton and Vicki's relationship deals a body blow to the chances of the farm remaining in the family. As fate would have it, Jack provides one last hope. But you can't control the future. "Don't count your chickens" is a frequent rejoinder. Gore and Vicki work to keep the farm going to give Jack the opportunity to continue the family business, but he chooses a different path. There is an heir but no spare, so the decision is made to sell the farm. Eventually none of the characters succeeds in their desire to remain connected with 'their' land. It is ironic that Cotton is the first to be dispossessed.

It is, perhaps, easy to see Josh (and Vicki) as the cause of the family's misfortunes rather than the catalyst. John, however, is as much to blame as anyone. Like Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*, he refuses to take the steps necessary to reverse the family's fortunes. He decides not to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the dairy boom. In addition, while he vaguely sees Cotton and Vicki as his successors, he makes no move to facilitate this until Cotton is on the verge of leaving.

The title of the play references its central motif. It brings together two elements that, on the surface, appear incongruous, but in fact sum up the opposing facets of rural life: the ‘ball’ represents the romantic view; the ‘deerstalkers’ (hunters) the reality. The images used for marketing New Zealand’s primary sector have become clichés: fluffy white lambs playing among daffodils, cows grazing contentedly on lush green grass. The reality of rural life is often much more brutal. Gore sums this up early in the play: “Lord knows, farming sheep isn’t everyone’s idea of a life. You lamb them, tail them, crutch them, slit their throats. When you think about it, there’s a lot of blood and faeces” (4). The ball also represents the end of an era. It will be one of the last partly because the fabric of the community is changing. Change may be inevitable, but sometimes it sees us sacrifice things we hold dear – and maybe we don’t miss them until they’re gone. This is true for the central characters in *The Deerstalkers’ Ball* and for their community. Their world is about to change in ways they don’t yet understand. They will miss it. They will adapt but they will be nostalgic. They will be, in a way, homesick. That is what I am trying to capture and put on record.

Conclusion

[...] in naturalistic drama of the best kind no laugh is conclusive, no tears are the final expression of emotion. There is no finality about the dramatist's statement, although the statement may be complete.

– J.L. Styan (71)

This exegesis picks out some of the influences on, and thinking behind, the development of *The Deerstalkers' Ball*. Each chapter addresses a different challenge I have grappled with along the way. The first chapter addresses my need to develop a clearer understanding of the genre I was working in. Intuitively, I had a sense of my comic style as I began this project. What was lacking was a more formal understanding of that style and clear points of reference that would help me work within the mode of serious comedy in a more disciplined way. Similarly, my use of comic techniques was largely intuitive. Through research, I have been able to develop my craft by broadening my understanding of the techniques of serious comedy and to apply them in a more considered way. I have investigated solutions to the practical problem of making a story set in the recent past relevant to today and learned something of the power of suggestion in creating dramatic tension and complexity. I have learned to critique my own work more actively and effectively. The project stalled somewhat until I was able to clarify succinctly what the story was about and a clear purpose for writing it. The final chapter explores the play's themes and my attempt to find a way to express those naturally within the space of the play.

My research has provided insights into the craft of playwriting and helped me shape the play. Importantly, studying *A Month in the Country*, *The Cherry Orchard* and other serious comedies has helped me place my work within a tradition and to clarify my own voice as a playwright. I have referenced only some of the works I have studied during this project. My wider reading includes works by gay, women and Māori writers (and some combinations thereof). I have taken something from each work I have read, which is what has made this MFA process so rewarding. It's an idea Thornton Wilder sums up very neatly in an introduction to a volume of his plays where he acknowledges the influence of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* on

his play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*: “I should be very happy if, in the future, some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine. Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs” (14). Sean O’Connor echoes this sentiment, connecting works by different gay writers throughout the 20th century:

In the same way that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a reinvention of (and homage to) *Private Lives* thirty years later, doesn’t Kevin Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* (1994) share some sort of debt to *Blithe Spirit*? Two very different and yet so similar explorations of the grief of two generations, half a century apart, each of which is attempting to reconcile itself to an early acquaintance with death (218).

The development of the play, and my development as a playwright throughout this process, has been greatly influenced by the people who have engaged with the project. The first and second readings, and the discussions that followed, provided insights from a group of professional actors and theatre practitioners. All of their observations were constructive; some were affirming and others more challenging. Interestingly, the first point of discussion after the initial reading, quite unprompted, concerned my designation of the play as being a comedy. The debate continued following the second reading. In a sense, this brought the project full circle, but with one major difference: I am now much more comfortable with the idea that there will be different views on this aspect of the play. I’m also more determined to stick to my guns. I feel I am in good company. Rattigan took his ‘notices’ seriously and claimed to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of reviews both of professional and amateur productions of his plays (xii-xiii). Despite caring deeply about the critical response to his plays, he refused to abandon comedy in favour of drama in order to be taken seriously by critics (xvi).

Serious comedy is balanced between its two essential components: comedy and pathos. For this reason, it is easy to see a work as essentially dramatic even when it is the writer’s clear intention that the play is comic. For me – and from reading the plays of others that seem to fit a serious comedy style – there a frisson of underlying sadness that deepens the impact of the play while the comedy gives it life and movement, helping to give it shape and forward momentum. It would be

enormously satisfying if someone seeing a performance of *The Deerstalkers' Ball* should find it amusing and entertaining and then, perhaps for a brief time on leaving the theatre, feel a lingering sense of sadness.

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