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Mask & Masquerade, Performance & Promise:

Carnival Meets Postmodernism
In New Zealand Women’s Theatre

And to us that evening
It was as if it were a masquerade,
It was as if it were a carnival.
A grand-gala fairy-spectacle

Akhmatova

Marie La Hood

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This thesis has been produced with the patient guidance and supervision of Lisa Warrington and the helpful advice of Dr. Christine Prentice.

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PREFACE

What the theatrical representation expresses, its proper message, is not so much the discourse of the characters as the operative conditions of that discourse.

—Anne Ubersfeld

Important connections between carnival spectacle and postmodern theatre are revealed when texts are explored from the perspective of performance. In performance ostensible stage 'realities' are created in which theatrical subjects are positioned according to a variety of overt codes of appearance, speech and behaviour. The stage world constitutes a complex system of interactive languages, images, symbols, shifting power relations and effects through which the subject is split, multiplied or reconstructed into a 'performing identity'.

Throughout this study I look at stage worlds, characters and the dynamic interplays operating between stage and audience, with a keen awareness of the operative conditions of carnival and postmodern theatrical discourses. This approach, as Anne Ubersfeld states in the epigraph above, is a useful way of discovering the "proper message"—what the theatrical representation "expresses" to the audience. In this analysis, however, the discourses of the characters are not peripheral to the conditions which produce them. Theatrical discourse itself not only illuminates a play's potential message or underlying themes, but is vital to the reading of complex codes of performance.

Plays by women have, characteristically, looked at, questioned, or dealt subversively with issues of patriarchal oppression in a variety of social, sexual, political or multicultural contexts. Myths have been dislodged, dystopias created, overturned, or counterbalanced by new realities—
mythological, realistic or imaginative worlds which offer liberating utopian alternatives for the representation of women on stage. Feminist influences and strategies continue to challenge and cut across ethnic, cultural and gender boundaries in the work of contemporary theatre practitioners, yet the processes and approaches to theatrical content and form have diversified significantly. Today's theatrical heroine is recognisable as a proliferating postmodern female subject; she is not presented merely as a recognisable cipher for polemical statement, nor is she securely positioned simply to express an overt political purpose.

Current theatre trends indicate that practitioners and audiences are caught up in the increasingly complex relationship that has evolved between theatre and performance arts practices, contemporary theory and the general cultural constructions that have come to be named “postmodern”. A great deal of postmodern theory seems to travel broadly but belong nowhere in particular. I propose to show that postmodern theatre may find a temporary home in Bakhtin's carnival, or at least an enticing resting place.

This thesis aims to link theatre theory and practice by focusing on aspects of performance in works which play a significant role in uncovering theatre's critical connection to postmodern culture, without being subsumed or marginalised by it. For the purposes of this analysis I draw on Bakhtin's theory of carnival. My approach to carnival is eclectic and puts a particular focus on performance, role playing and gender identity in the theatre. I consider the liberating power and hierarchical inversions of carnival as theatre 'spectacle', and gender as a cultural and theatrical construct.\footnote{The term 'spectacle' is interchangeable with 'performance' in this context, to emphasise the carnival's connection with the visible, tangible 'other' world of the stage. The terms overlap also to accommodate a semiotic exploratory approach to theatre texts which is concerned primarily with the ambiguity of signs, overt strategies for constructing meaning in the theatre and complex 'stage identities'.} Three recently written and performed contemporary New Zealand plays provide rich material for this analysis:

*Ophelia Thinks Harder*, by Jean Betts (1994).
These plays highlight some of the major issues and theatrical strategies currently employed by women playwrights in the 1990s. They have been selected as theatrical works that are multitextured, subversive, concerned with gender issues, and enriched by postmodern and carnivalesque influences.

In talking about carivalesque aspects of women's theatre, I will concentrate on the power of dialogue (visual and verbal) in theatre texts, examine talk as utterance, disguise, gesture or movement, and consider the manner in which these elements interact to constitute a kind of play for the audience. By play, I mean the performing of acts “not part of the immediate business of life but in mimicry or rehearsal or in display”, 2 acts which are performed for recreation and amusement. Play in this sense is not to be confused with official games, with official rules. In his introduction to Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin characterised the carnivalesque as “a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture”. 3

Carnivalesque forms, ranging from ritual spectacles to various types of verbal expression, have a number of common attributes, two of which are particularly pertinent here: first, they existed outside dominant cultural practices, and second, they were based in laughter. According to Bakhtin’s thesis:

The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer;

Although they have distant links with pagan festivals and Christian liturgy, comic rituals and spectacles of carnival are theatrical rather than religious:

... they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church’s cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside of the church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere. 4

4 Bakhtin, p. 7.
The conjunction of carnival spectacle with postmodern theatre performance puts a special emphasis on the subversive strategies, gender reversals and hierarchical inversions of the play texts. In addition, it draws attention to polymorphous structures, duplicitous theatrical codes and theatrical styles that are perverse, yet liberating.

Acceptance of the above conjunction leads to recognition of the problems and complexities involved in this exploration. Attempts to discern how different modes of performance create different realities, or how symbolic signs and bodily presence work together in the theatre to create the illusion of material substance, are not directed towards the ironing out of inherent complexities, but are designed to raise questions and provoke discussion. Theoretical probes such as these offer an illuminating way into the problems and relationships of discernibly dense subject matter.

The chapters that follow do not present a formulated thesis or definite lines of division between traditional, avant-garde, male-oriented, feminist or postmodern theatre practices. Instead they explore contemporary modes of performance which challenge a dominant aesthetics of representation. Each chapter looks through a particular lens at how it is possible to reinscribe, through the act of performance itself, the ephemeral margins between past and present, theory and practice, appearance and reality.

Chapter 1 introduces some of the theoretical insights which inform this analysis, and establishes a theatrical connection between postmodern performance and carnival spectacle. Chapters 2, 3, & 4 carry this connection further by exploring, in each of the plays, the different ways ambivalent codes interact to create carnivalesque or postmodern performance. The conclusion attempts to draw the diverse threads of previous chapters together.

The postmodern notion of meaning as 'constructed' in particular texts informs the feminist analysis of how 'woman' is constructed as a sign in patriarchal discourse, and provides the foundation for possible deconstructions or re-constructions of dominant modes of representation. The carnivalesque assertion that meaning, and to some extent the text itself, are created in the act of reception is a liberating one for theatrical criticism, in which the audience’s role is as integral to the creation of a stage performance
as are those of the playwright, director or actors. It is important to be aware, however, that even when no final set of meanings resides inherently in a text, the performance still establishes preferred readings and subject positions.

I intend to show that where theatre is practically involved in the cultural struggle over images, values or material conditions, as it is in the selected plays, the complex processes constituting the performance event itself are on the cutting edge of the theoretical discourses that have affected other arts and cultural practices in the 1990s.
Chapter I

Carnival Codes

Postmodern Strategies

Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible.

... Carnival is the home of extra-coding

—Umberto Eco

The carnival tradition has been resurrected and appears in a variety of forms, styles and contexts, as recent trends in the theatrical and visual arts indicate. In this chapter I set out to determine the ways in which postmodern and feminist theatrical forms, codes and variants of style contribute to this practice. By focusing on the processes which construct meaning, gender and stage identities in the theatre, I intend to show how disparate theatrical elements are thematically contained or enhanced by performance strategies that are clearly recognizable as carnivalesque.

Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnival is valuable as it uncovers a resistive potential in medieval carnival that is apparent in all the works I investigate in this study. This resistance to ideological, social or political systems of repression is a liberating force which denigrates, destroys or subverts established balances of power. Carnival’s steadfast opposition to all that is fixed, closed or final parallels the potential for resistance or subversion in both feminine discourse and postmodern theatrical practice.

In his often cited description of the contemporary cultural condition, Jean-Francois Lyotard evokes the eclecticism that pervades the postmodern

world. That this eclecticism is a pervasive and forceful feature of postmodern theatre is a view brought immediately into focus here by the closely considered selection of plays for exploration and analysis. While the chosen plays reflect many similar theatrical surfaces, theoretical biases and practical performance strategies, their subject matter, inspirational sources and creative processes appear to diverge markedly.

The tension produced by the interplay of similarities and differences in the prescribed space of these particular performance texts focuses attention on the ambiguity of the theatrical sign. Contradictions and ambivalences around which much contemporary theatrical discourse is structured, evoke the liberating paradoxes of carnival, and, in this study, provide the impetus for an ongoing exploration of subversive theatrical discourses and the shifting temporal and spatial boundaries of the practical theatre event.

By taking the notion of carnival as a major focus I examine the concept of ‘performance’ and the making of spectacle in the theatre from a revitalised perspective. Carnivalesque influences on artistic trends, and their developments in individual texts, have been traced through many literary genres—with a particular emphasis on poetry and the novel. In the theatre genre carnivalesque forms and practices are particularly strong, though more often than not carnival is explored by critics and artists who tend to associate it with ‘other’ historical theatrical influences such as the Commedia Dell’Arte tradition. 3 Though I draw attention to the pervasiveness of the carnivalesque and its continued reappearance through a wide range of artistic genres, my discussion of carnival in New Zealand theatre in the 1990s picks up elusive elements of the theatrical carnivalesque of the past and centres them in the present climate of postmodern theatrical performance.

This concept of carnival performance is inclusive; it opens up both new prospects and old insights for contemporary theatre analysis. Throughout this study it provides a lens through which a diverse array of postmodern and feminist theatrical strategies, codes and effects are able to be explored and focused, in the recent work of New Zealand women theatre practitioners. The selected plays open up sites of exploration and establish frames of reference that, at times, bring the postmodern theatre of surfaces into collision with ‘the

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carnivalesque’—one of the many practices in theatre art and performance tradition that refuses to erase specific histories, traditions, gender or cultural differences.

Carnival is characterised by abundance and excess while postmodernism emphasises overlapping, fluid boundaries, and, like carnival, it is opposed to all that is oppressive or fixed. In each of the works explored visual and verbal codes of performance overlap. Mask, masquerade, dress, comic inversion, role-playing and spectacle interrelate to produce a simultaneously subversive and liberating language of theatre. A network of complex theatrical relationships is developed through ambivalent or multiple positioning of stage subjects, and diverse applications of the spectator’s role. In these plays dynamic interactions between characters and shifting borders between stage and audience uncover significant sites of exploitation, resistance and power. This is a fertile ground which takes the weight of conflicting perspectives and reveals the sometimes tenuous, but ongoing links between postmodern performance strategies and the ritual reversals of carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival developed from his study of the works of Rabelais which, he argues, use traditional elements of medieval carnival in a powerful way. Rabelais is, according to Bakhtin, the most explicit and colourful literary exponent of the ambivalent languages and codes of medieval folk humour and the grotesque.

Striking features of medieval carnival spectacle and folk humour are parody and various representations of the grotesque. Essential components of the grotesque are symbolic inversion and degradation. A critical feature of degradation in the comic grotesque is that it transfers the high, spiritual or abstract to a material level:

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but a regenerating one.

... The grotesque ... is the fruitful earth and the womb.

It is always conceiving ...  

In the carnivalesque repressive social hierarchies are overturned, normal everyday activities distorted or grossly exaggerated and base animal instincts

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5 Bakhtin, p. 21.
foregrounded to produce extravagant, colourful images and an ambivalent language of chaos, abundance, renewal and release:

This is the reason why medieval parody is unique, quite unlike the purely formalist literary parody of modern times, which has a solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence.  

The world of medieval carnival is an upside-down world that, like the theatre event, operates at a level separated from everyday existence. Subversion, resistance and the reversal of normal codes are the main functions of ‘other-worldly’ carnival activities which challenge and disrupt rigid power structures. The carnivalesque subverts hierarchies and overflows, shifts or breaks down oppressive barriers between high and low, spiritual and material, male and female, young and old, past and present, participant and spectator. Carnival highlights performance and is based on paradox. In this heterogeneous and disruptive world of mass activity and symbolic inversion differences are either exaggerated or collapsed, and individual identities distorted or masked.

The perspective of subversive carnival laughter as festive, positive and regenerative, is linked to the idea of worldly freedom and medieval carnival’s pre-occupation with the human sphere. Bakhtin’s carnival focuses on a life-affirming lower stratum of human existence, creating a continuum where death and burial are constantly superseded by life and rebirth. Carnival laughter, for instance, subverts and transforms:

... it is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.  

The nonconformity of Rabelais’ images to the literary norms and canons predominant in the sixteenth century, and still evident today, provided the stimulus for Bakhtin’s critical analysis of the carnivalesque:

No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished.

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6 Bakhtin, p. 21.
7 Bakhtin, pp. 11-12.
to all pomposity, to every ready-made situation in the sphere of thought and world outlook.  

According to Bakhtin, Rabelaisian images are completely at home within the thousand-year-old development of popular culture. Evolving over a hundred years of medieval carnival the rich idiom of forms and symbols seen in the work of Rabelais expressed the complex carnival experience of the people. This experience:

... opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms.

Carnival is subversive, ambivalent, regenerative and traditionally associated with the comic. Manifestations of the carnival, with their basis in laughter and rejection of 'high art,' display several common features. These range from verbal word-play to ritual spectacle and are particularly pertinent for postmodern and feminist theatre performance:

Because of their obvious sensual character and strong elements of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle . . . .

However, carnival is not a spectacle that people simply observe,

They live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people . . . During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom . . . Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.

'Carnival time life' provides an intriguing parallel to the time life of theatrical performance. During both a theatre performance and a carnival celebration people are brought together in a vividly shared experience and temporary suspension of everyday life. Each of these collaborative events creates its own reality and is subject to the laws of its own space, time and freedom.

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8 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, Introduction, pp. 2-3. All further references to Bakhtin in this chapter relate to this text, and will be cited by name and page number only.
9 Bakhtin, pp. 10-11.
10 Bakhtin, p. 7.
What does Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival spectacle and laughter mean for the plays selected for study? Unravelling elements and codes of the carnivalesque in these stage worlds seems a simple task if we keep in sight the view that, like carnival, theatre is a symbolic world temporarily separated from everyday reality. Yet this is at the same time a concrete, contradictory world in which “the ambiguity of the sign derives from the fact that it represents something to someone.”

The carnival spirit and experience expressed in Rabelais’ work has a close affinity with the diverse forms, images, codes and expressions of contemporary popular culture—and with postmodern theatrical forms and strategies. Popular culture has always been concerned with day by day struggles over meaning and the balance of power. In today’s postmodern climate popular culture continues as a dynamic site where meanings are constructed and power structures tested, but it is also an ambivalent site, like the carnival of medieval folk culture, where dominant ideologies are overturned and established meanings playfully contested.

In the context of theatrical performance carnival opens up a set of ambivalent symbols, masks and codes which allows its participants to enter a different order of things. The irresistible carnival spirit, in its many manifestations, is considered here as a rich source of creativity in the theatre. Its connection to medieval folk humour with its festive inversions, grotesque imagery and liberating values offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world.

The ambivalence of the sign is an indispensable trait and positive determining factor of the carnivaleque. Ambivalent laughter needs to be readdressed in its various manifestations of the carnival with close attention to pervasiveness and transformative capacity.

Following Bakhtin, Umberto Eco connects comedy to carnival—

By assuming a mask, everyone can behave like the animal-like characters of comedy. We can commit any sin while remaining innocent, because we laugh (which means: we are not concerned with that).

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and carnival to theatre—

Carnival is the natural theater in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the masters. In carnival even kings act like the populace. Comic behaviour, formerly an object of judgement of superiority on our part, becomes, in this case, the rule. The upside-down world has become the norm.

Carnival is revolution (or revolution is carnival): kings are decapitated (that is, lowered, made inferior) and the crowd is crowned. 12

Eco also comments on carnival’s connection with popular culture, claiming that popular cultures are always determined by cultivated cultures. 13 He points to the current popularity of transgressional theories such as carnival and suggests that today’s instrument of social control—the mass media—is based upon “a continuous carnivalisation of life”. 14 Using the tactic of reversal that characterises carnival, Eco highlights certain fundamental aspects of Bakhtin’s theory (such as the notion of hierarchical inversion) so that he can overturn it and claim its falsity.

Although he appears to disagree with Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, Eco’s views on the relationship of humour to the carnivalesque converge with Bakhtin’s fundamental concepts. Eco’s complex analysis of different types of humour attempts to trace a relationship between carnival laughter and ‘comic freedom’. His views open up what he calls “the hyper-Bakhtinian ideology of carnival” to a broader critical perspective. The suggestion that mass culture produces a continuous carnivalization of life draws also on apparently contradictory notions of the carnival fair or marketplace as both a business and a theatre spectacle—“To support the universe of business, there is no business like show business”. 15

Eco is playing a carnival game, deliberately misreading, or politicising Bakhtin when he sees the appeal to the great cosmic/comic carnival as “some diabolical trick”. At the same time as he questions certain aspects of Bakhtin’s theory Eco reinforces its underlying tenets. Both Eco and Bakhtin see “the

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12 Umberto Eco, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”, p. 3.
14 Carnivalization in this sense refers to the transformation of everyday images and values into a dimension of surfaces and spectacle which, like carnival, creates its own separate reality and operates under its own modality.
15 Eco, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”, p. 3.
manifestation of a profound drive towards liberation and subversion in
medieval carnival.” 16 Rather than proving Bakhtin wrong, Eco’s fresh
approach to medieval carnival, comic subversion and liberation, rearticulates
and extends a theory which has forged an authoritative place in critical
history, and makes it more accessible.

Carnival celebrates freedom. It operates in a suspended time dimension, and
creates ambiguous codes that are external to the ruling or dominant system.
The stress on freedom from all that is prescriptive, serious or fixed, the
challenging or disruption of rigid social boundaries or limiting linguistic
codes, and the symbolic accommodation of a wide range of cultural
differences and perspectives, are features carnival has in common with
postmodernism.

The notion that ‘comic freedom’ is achieved by the breaking of common and
intertextual frames is explored in depth by Eco. His argument that in comedy
the broken frame must be presupposed but never spelled out, sheds light on
the suspect idea of comic or carnivalesque ‘liberation’ as authorised
transgression:

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already
be recognised and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviours are forbidden, and must feel the
majesty of the forbidding norm to appreciate their transgression. Without a valid law to break, carnival is
impossible. 17

Eco, in his book _A Theory of Semiotics_, proposes a theory of codes which
draws attention to the “complexity and unpredictability” of systems of sign
production. 18 Working on the principle that a “consistently ambiguous
uncoded context gives rise, if accepted by society, to a convention, and thus to
to a coding coupling,” he insists:

A semiotic theory must not deny that there are concrete acts of interpretation which produce senses that the code
could not foresee, otherwise the principle of the flexibility and creativity of language would not hold. But these interpretations sometimes produce new portions of the

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16 Eco, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”, p. 3.
code, inasmuch as they constitute embryonic processes of overcoding and undercoding. 19

The terms ‘overcoding’ and ‘undercoding’ are used to differentiate between a process which proceeds from existing codes to more analytic subcodes and one which proceeds from non-existent codes to potential codes. 20 To overcome the confusion arising from cases which interwine these two processes Eco postulates a category of ‘extra-coding’ which covers both movements simultaneously. 21 This realm of extra-coding provides the subject matter for both a theory of codes and a theory of sign production. Eco’s realm of extra-coding has been described as “the home of carnival.” 22

Eco has forcefully re-articulated Bakhtin’s principle that the carnival participant must be aware of the rule—that festive carnival activity is based on the pleasure and freedom that results from the disruption of established laws, hierarchies, traditions and beliefs. His theory of codes and his observations on humour and the carnivalesque are pertinent to this study as they provide a practical focus and useful tools for analysis.

The phrases “carnival is a realm of extra coding” and “without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible” stimulate perceptions which bring out resonances of the carnivalesque in the plays. These useful adages, generated by Eco’s theory, give a practical, contemporary focus to this theatrical exploration.

The carnivalesque sets up an ambivalent signifying practice which allows the distortion of the subject and signifier, a vital factor in feminist discourses which foreground female subjectivity, and in postmodern theatrical strategies which destabilise the subject. To read codes of symbolic inversion and the carnivalesque in the theatre the audience/spectator needs to identify the enunciating subject. This is not simply a dialectic of speaker to message/discourse, rather it is a point of status and ontology in the text. 23

20 Although it may be easily detected this double movement can be problematic. Eco points out that these processes are frequently intertwined in most common cases of sign production and interpretation, so that in many instances it seems difficult to establish whether one is over or undercoding.
23 Furey, p. 76.
focus then on the carnivalesque notion of ‘fading of the subject’ 24 offers the opportunity for further exploration of subversive dramatic processes and proliferating postmodern theatre practices and forms. It could be argued that the character of theatrical performance is always imbued with aphanisis as it is part of the makeup of dramatic characterisation to be a signifier as well as a speaking subject. 25 However, the carnivalesque extends this to where the enunciator actually does fade and yet the signifier persists.

Julia Kristeva rereads Bakhtin from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Her postulation of the carnivalesque as “the residual of a cosmogony” aligns it at once with the subversive and marginal. 26 But what might it mean for theatrical performance to foreground carnivalesque elements? Kristeva explains how the carnival participant becomes both “actor and spectator”, both “subject and object of the game”:

A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. Within the carnival the subject is reduced to nothingness. 27

Although Kristeva makes it clear that the carnivalesque is not solely a postmodernist or feminist phenomenon, 28 carnivalesque elements, styles and strategies, and the consequent aphanisis or “fading of the enunciating subject and his/her status with the signifier,” 29 have influenced

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24 This phrase refers to the process of Lacanian aphanisis—a disappearance which, in the carnivalesque, can occur in the enunciating subject. Lacan, discussing the ambiguity of the sign as representation, links aphanisis closely with the representation of the signifier as the subject, Lacan, p. 206.
25 The term aphanisis was first introduced into psychoanalytic language by Ernest Jones who employed the term to complement the castration complex. Jacques Lacan finds the view of aphanisis as ‘the fear of seeing desire disappear’ too limited. He argues: “Aphanisis is to be situated in a more radical way at the level at which the subject manifests itself in a movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal. In quite a different way, I have called this movement the fading of the subject”, Lacan, pp. 206-207.
26 Furey, p. 76.
28 Like Bakhtin, Kristeva points out that the carnivalesque is part of the Menippean satire form, Desire in Language, 1980.
29 Patrick Furey claims that the meta-narrative consequences of the fading enunciating subject and his/her status with the signifier have played a major role in the formation of twentieth-century narrative forms, Furey, p. 80. This effect is also evident in postmodern and feminist theatre forms.
contemporary theatre forms, and play an important role in this investigation of carnival performance.

This exploration attends to some of the ways in which theatre performance converges with medieval carnival forms and postmodern practices. Theatre creates its own 'reality' which traditionally operates under a system and within a sphere separated from everyday existence. The medium of performance is a flexible site of overt interaction and double coding. As artistic expressions of the postmodern, or carnival spirit are ambivalent, open-ended and complexly coded, they find a natural home in the theatre—the realm *par excellence* of 'extra-coding'.

In *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, Johannes Birringer looks into the theory and aesthetics of performance. He attempts to come to terms with current trends in the theatre and the performing arts by exploring different contemporary modes of performance. At the same time he brings postmodern debate into the focus of the theatre in an effort "to reappropriate and reposition the theatrical metaphors that have been so widely used by other cultural discourses and practices." 30 Rather than proposing a formulated theory, a definition, or a new model of postmodern performance, Birringer points to the ambivalences he experiences in thinking of theatre, and writing for the theatre. He refers to the contradictory space of theatre where:

\[
\text{different realities—the simultaneity of the} \\
\text{unsimultaneous—present in theatre productions . . .} \\
\text{take place in time and through time, on either side of} \\
\text{the existing or invisible wall. 31}
\]

The different realities represented in theatre performance, whether diverging from or converging with the reality that we experience or 'know', are always on show. In 'live' theatre, though the viewed stage world and its inhabitants are commonly masqueraded as 'other', and the reality shown is a visible product of co-operative human labour and artistic endeavour, the viewer is an integral part of the volatile processes of creating a performance. Whether or not there is an 'invisible wall' the theatre audience shares the contingent physical space and bodily existence of the stage world. Even when a strictly

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31 Birringer, p. 3.
realistic theatrical form and style is adhered to, there is a vivid sense of this world’s unreality:

Unlike literature, film, painting, or the popular mass media, the theatre must show its physical, bodily existence and its “liveness,” the volatile progress of its human labor, the contingencies of the space in which it labors, and its schizophrenic awareness of its own unreality. 32

Birringer’s comments about theatre point up some of the shared realities between stage and audience and highlight theatrical features that are direct links to carnival and postmodern performance. His critical perceptions that theatre invariably shows different levels of reality and creates a suspended sense of time in an ambivalent, physical space, capture the essence of carnival and a postmodern spirit which is reflected in the plays. Postmodern theatre forms and strategies self-consciously enhance this awareness of bodily presence, and exaggerate the artifice of ambiguous constructions, contingent realities and schizophrenic processes which are inherent in a ‘live’ theatre performance.

A number of distinctive elements of postmodern performance and spectacle link theatre with the notion of carnival: ambivalent laughter, bodily presence, time and space contingencies, ambiguous dress and language codes, create a sense suspended reality and exhibit a powerful drive towards liberation and subversion. Significant ways in which these elements affect or shape a particular playwright’s world, the positioning its audience, or its characters on stage, are yet to be elucidated.

Of the three chosen plays, Betts’s *Ophelia Thinks Harder* is the most overtly carnivalesque. It creates double codes and constructs duplicitous subject positions which are intricately tied up with the disruptive processes of carnival laughter, reversal and release, and of aphanisis. Carnivalesque elements operate fluidly and effectively within the postmodern pastiche form of this play. The link to the carnivalesque in Betts’s play is clearly signalled by its use of ritual and disguise, its comic form, ambivalence, pastiche style, use of role reversal and verbal and visual manifestations of the grotesque. Like the process of carnival which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, generates laughter “through a suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms,

32 Birringer, p. 3.
and prohibitions”, 33 Betts’s appropriation of Shakespeare’s tragic hero’s role for her reconstructed protagonist Ophelia, at once creates a carnivalesque sense of a world upside down.

Fiona Samuel’s solo play, Lashings of Whipped Cream, uses the ambivalence of carnival laughter to rescue the sex-worker from the ‘old’ hegemonic identification as a stigmatised, abused victim or deviant other. The playwright creates a topsy turvy world symbolised by a set depicting a fully equipped dominatrix dungeon, which is both a mundane place of business and an exotic retreat for the ‘acting out’ of sexual fantasies. The solo performer sells ‘carnival’ rather than her body as she opens up a comic, carnivalesque discourse which liberates the grotesque body, its images, functions and pleasures, from oppressive forms and structures.

Although not ostensibly or traditionally carnivalesque, Daughters of Heaven provides a clear theatrical space where ambivalent carnival constructions and multiple positioning of subjects take place in a world suspended from everyday reality—in an ‘entirely different sphere’. Several recognisable features of medieval carnival operate in this private, free-ranging, imaginative world, separated from the strictures of the establishment. 34 Role-reversal, ritual, game-playing and symbolic inversions shift identities and blur distinctions between appearance and reality. Ambiguous codes of carnival generate an ongoing dramatic tension and audience involvement as they clash throughout the play with the official worlds of law and order, class prejudice and restrictive public mores.

The selected plays, in various ways, reflect a feminist concern with shifting gender identities and power relationships, and give dominance to the theatrical positioning and status of the female subject. Subversive postmodern and carnivalesque strategies play a vital part in the process of destabilising the subject, and contribute to the construction of ambiguous stage identities. Each of the plays captures the essence of Bakhtin’s carnival, by

33 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p.10.
34 Carnival codes, which appear at first to be alien to the serious content of this play are opened up when it is understood that they operate under a different modality. Julia Kristeva argues that the carnivalesque is the residual of a cosmogony which offers no methodology. She claims that its epistemology operates under a different modality which initially appears to be indecipherable but remains so only under the stricture of the cosmogony, Desire in Language, 1980.
engaging in some way with its transgressive power, symbolic inversions, liberating laughter and heteroglossia.\textsuperscript{35}

A straightforward semiotic analysis is not undertaken in this study, although a conscious awareness of the language of signs helps relate the chosen performance texts to one another. Reading of complex theatrical signs is a rewarding way of demarcating similarities or differences in theatrical conceptions, techniques and approaches, and, in the context of theatre performance, involves positive spectator participation. Theatrical codes and techniques which construct meaning, stage identities and spectacle are intimately connected to the style, structure and reception of a playtext in performance. To read the codes of carnival and discern the postmodern influences in the plays, we must therefore be attentive to their overt displays.

According to Jean Baudrillard:

\begin{quote}

Theatre is nothing but a sign, a total fabrication which may have originated in rituals designed to seduce the gods. But in order to create a performance, the signs must be allowed the illusion of material substance.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

To create a performance there must be a show, a display of signs, a visible product of the progress of labour and a physical or bodily presence. As part of this process, the volatility of a ‘live’ performance allows it to enter the symbolic zone, creating tension between the contingency of the sign and artistic efforts to represent a real world on stage.

The task ahead is to explore how particular theatrical texts handle the contradictions and tensions involved in the processes of creating a performance. The overt performance codes and theatrical strategies put in place in the plays determine how their stageworlds and audiences interact, and how they deal with the ‘schizophrenia’ of their own unreality.

\textsuperscript{35} Dialogic discourse, polyphony and “heteroglossia” are alternating terms in Bakhtin’s discussions. They refer to discourses in which one voice does not dominate, but rather joins with other voices in a dialogue of unresolved ideologies. In monologic discourse one ‘objectified’ voice or fixed perspective takes over or controls the dialogue.

Connections between medieval carnival and postmodern theatre will now be examined by focusing specifically on the plays. Particular note will be taken of their utilisation of subversive strategies, postmodern techniques, and their differing approaches to theatrical manifestations of carnival inversion, laughter, and the grotesque.
CHAPTER II POSTMODERN PASTICHE

Ophelia Thinks Harder

What do women want?
We want men to stand out of our sunshine, that is all.
—Margaret Sievwright (1896).
I see strife; I see gender war; I see the initial X.
—Woman 1, Ophelia Thinks Harder.

Jean Betts’s *Ophelia Thinks Harder* is one of a group of New Zealand plays, written and performed in 1993 as part of a national celebration of the centenary of women’s suffrage. These plays premiered in Wellington under the umbrella title of “The WOPPA Festival.” ¹

Composed in the seamless form of a postmodern pastiche, *Ophelia Thinks Harder* is outrageously carnivalesque and overtly subversive. Betts explores the relations between men and women by taking a known tragic hero, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and placing him in a contemporary comedy where gender roles are reversed and female subjectivity dominates. In the process of appropriating Shakespeare’s tragedy, and turning it into a comedy, Jean Betts reworks *Hamlet* from a female character’s point of view. ² While exposing

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¹ WOPPA refers to the Women Professional Playwrights’ Association, newly formed for this occasion. Other plays dedicated to the WOPPA enterprise were: *Farewell Speech*, adapted for the stage by Cathy Downes from the novel by Rachel McAlpine; *Cracks*, by Lorae Parry; *Lashings of Whipped Cream*, and “Words of Love”, by Fiona Samuel, *Love-Knots*, by Vivienne Plumb; “Educating Barbie”, a collectively written work, presented by Victoria University Drama Club; “Tiggy-Tiggy Touch Wood”, by Renée, originally commissioned by Lisa Warrington for Lunchtime Theatre, Allen Hall, University of Otago; “Stone Telling”, a puppet theatre-piece by Rose Beauchamp.

² Betts, in her preliminary notes to the play text, describes two personal insights that led to the writing of this play: “I remembered studying Hamlet at school, and like most other girls in my class, identifying with him and finding Ophelia alien; while at the same time being aware that even so, too often in my life I was judged not on how I measured up to Hamlet, but how I compared to Ophelia”. “The seeds of this play were sown when, during an acting class, tutors
the inequalities of class and gender, this play illustrates and celebrates not only the empowerment of women but the complex dynamic of theatrical performance.

The expropriation of Shakespeare's female protagonist in the title, the inclusion of other familiar 'named' characters, recognisable plot excerpts and famous speeches, together with snatched allusions from other well-known literary works, are elements which lead us into the complex territory of intertextual relations. Intertextual resonances and powerful theatrical strategies such as cross-dressing and the staging of a play-within-a-play (both of which were used to great effect by Shakespeare himself) move our focus in a number of different directions.

Classical and religious references, parodies of known characters from unrelated texts, cribbings and distortions of Shakespeare's text, as well as fascinating snippets from other well-known literary or dramatic works, resonate in a pastiche theatrical construction. These interact continuously to mark this play's intertextuality, postmodern patterning and carnival form.

The play constructs a set of theatrically ambiguous masks and disguises to be worn, manipulated or discarded. These meta-codes operate at the level of appearances, by design, with frivolity, or by studied attention to elements of surprise, as the characters frequently demonstrate. The spectator is thus offered a series of intriguing and constantly changing critical positions and options with which to engage in the multilayered, comic, carnivalesque action.

Ophelia Thinks Harder parodies Shakespeare's text Hamlet — inserting familiar speeches, borrowing from the plot, attending to important moments of dramatic conflict, comically juxtaposing elements of tragedy and farce and appropriating famous words and characters. Not only Shakespeare's expressed surprise that I had made Hamlet 'a believable woman' when delivering one of his famous soliloquies as an exercise. Why the difficulty accepting that women (and actresses?) are capable of experiencing and expressing Hamlet's complexities?

3 Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, describes 'Intertextuality' as "the process by which new text, explicitly or implicitly, borrows numerous elements from other, already existing texts". (Desire in Language, Introduction, 1980). In the context of postmodernism this involves a conscious reworking and manipulation of the original elements to suit the artistic requirements of the newly created text. Betts's play provides a notable demonstration of intertextual exploration, in adjunct with a provocative use of postmodern, feminist and pastiche theatrical techniques and forms.
characters, but also Beckett's (Lucky), Shaw's (St. Joan), and familiar figures of the Church (Eve, the Virgin Mary), are appropriated and re-contextualised. Besides reworking Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play has its own appealing agenda, and a host of unnervingly grotesque, yet 'familiar' characters. 4

It has been suggested that postmodernism deconstructs "the traditional art myth of originality" and that "self-identity fluctuates in its nature as it interacts with this sign-environment." 5 Jean Betts's play text, in this context, is recognisably postmodern. Its pastiche construction incorporates many carnivalesque features, and a number of postmodern meta-techniques are self-consciously articulated within the medium of theatrical performance. According to Lawler-Dormer, in postmodernist projects:

> The plural positions acted out by both artist and viewer result in the decentering of the subject. The theme of the work becomes the event of exchange between the art object and the viewer. 6

This play is an example of a work in which the subject is "decentered". Ophelia usurps Hamlet's role as the protagonist, but she is just one of a group of characters who all have an important part to play. The characters are ciphers for the controversies raised in an outrageous carnivalesque spectacle. Betts's strategies and themes provide sites of interaction between stage and audience. But her comic theatrical treatment goes beyond this point. The infusion of numerous postmodern and carnival elements opens up even more vital and challenging arenas of stage/audience exchange and dialogic debate.

According to Martin Buzacott "It is regrettable that the study of carnival laughter has become such a serious business". He suggests that "the problem with an increasingly 'de-carnivalised' approach to carnival, seen in several works on the subject following Bakhtin's founding *Rabelais and His World*, is

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4 *Ophelia Thinks Harder* is not the first theatrical reconstruction of subjective space that Betts has attempted: *Revenge Of The Amazons* (inspired by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) is a play crammed full of outrageous and lively female characters - Amazons, lovers, fairies - who act out a hilarious and complicated scenario.


6 Lawlor-Dormer, pp. 40-41.
that it raises doubts as to the credentials of the authors in relation to the subject". 7

Betts does not delve consciously into those aspects of carnival that have become such a "serious business" for Bakhtin's successors. Instead her theatrical applications of the carnivalesque illustrate a lively engagement with the essential social codes and cultural values associated with carnival freedom and festivity. She shows, in the theatre context, how carnival performance is a spectacle brought to life by a keen awareness of the power of Rabelaisian subversion, grotesquerie, carnival celebration, and the laughter associated with it.

In a seductive carnivalesque style Betts's play works overtly to disrupt comfortable surfaces and deflect avenues of linear logic but above all to amuse. The audience is confronted with a 'driven Hamlet' who is both a sensitive new-age guy and an egotistical wimp; an emotionally floundering, ontologically split, but enquiring Ophelia; the ghost of her Mum, alias the Virgin Mary; a tale-telling chauvinistic Queen; an outspoken male-bashing maid; a dreamy, anachronistically situated Horatio; a Beckettian Polonius who makes teasing, unchartered references to "tennis", "skulls" and "the Unfinished Works of Puncher and Watman." 8

It is not just the characters who become confused about the status of themselves and the other characters, but the audience also, until it ultimately becomes impossible to tell ghost from body. When the subject and the signifier merge, it is possible for an entire stage world to become populated with fading subjects.

Right from the start her characters appear to align themselves with the culture of carnival folk humour and its characteristic symbolic inversions.


8 This is an allusion to Lucky's long speech in Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot, pp. 42-49.
and rituals. Ophelia tries unsuccessfully to read meaningful codes into an empty ritual performed by her maid, and her frustration shows:

**MAID:** But the slime, Madam, read the slime.
**OPHELIA:** The slime. Phew. Well there’s plenty of slime. But I can’t make out one initial. Mind you, if you wanted to, you could see the whole alphabet. There—that could be an H—or an I. Or even a Z—or an N . . . Oh this is pointless, girl.
*(She kicks her)* (p.1)

At first we have no indication of the significance of the strangely quiet ritual that opens the play (performed by the Maid with two boxes, a candle and water) or why Ophelia wears symbolic black, a hat and veil. Carnivalisation is part of the signifying surface structure of the images, but the carnival character of the deep structure of the image remains elusive. Amid the hint of ritual magic, a strange obsession with slime and a curious fixation with letters of the alphabet, the images and utterances of this scene start to establish a link to the carnival grotesque. It’s not long before the audience learns that one box contains onions that won’t sprout and the other dead snails—a mundane image that symbolises death, with only a hint of ‘new life’. Traditionally, in the genre of carnival folk humour, grotesque images and laughter degrade and materialise but have a positive aspect. The dead snails and onions about to sprout signify contact with the earth that both swallows up and gives birth.

The ambivalence of the surface sign is sustained also in the kick Ophelia deals out to her Maid—a gesture of degradation which ‘kills’ but at the same time ‘digs a bodily grave for a new birth.’ 9 Ophelia’s black garb reinforces the image of death, yet the water and candle are positive symbols of rebirth and light. The blurring of borders between processes of life and death, and the fanciful free interplay between plant, animal and human forms, are subversive strategies strongly associated with postmodern superfluity and the exaggerations and bodily excesses of the carnival grotesque:

**MAID:** Madam, this is very powerful magic... one drop of this in contact with the skin will make man or woman madly dote upon the next live creature that it sees.
**OPHELIA:** Madly dote?

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9 Bakhtin states that in the grotesque of carnival folk culture “to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more, and better.” *Rebelais and His World*, p. 21.
MAID: Helplessly in love.
What's in it?
MAID: Spawn of a frog that's been steeped in hellebore—semen of a bull collected after copulation, blood of worms, faeces of sheep, and . . .
OPHELIA: Uggh! Is this a love potion or a curse. (p. 2)

Here comic ritual and exaggeration combine to emphasise the positive aspect of the grotesque. Images of bodily life heighten the themes of growth, fertility, and an overflowing abundance—the latter a trait which also signals postmodern plurality, multiplicity, infringement of borders and deliberate breaking of frames.

This paradoxical opening demonstrates several of the powerful subversive strategies of humour and ambivalence Betts constantly employs. She invites the audience along to join her motley characters in a celebration of carnival which by its very nature is not just subversive but deliberately, provocatively so.

The task of linking textual utterances to enunciating subjects is not a simple process of matching speech to speaker—an impossible task in the carnivalesque. As Ophelia constantly reminds us, she bears an uneasy relationship to her role as enunciating subject:

OPHELIA: Is there nothing I can do to find out what lies ahead? Who lies in store for me? There must be something I can do apart from just wait, wait, wait . . . (p. 1)

Ophelia’s scornful reply to the maid’s familiar lines “There is a divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will . . .” places her and the audience in an insecure subject position:

OPHELIA: Fool, I only want to help make happen what’s going to happen anyway. If I knew my fate; if I was sure of his name, I could avoid all the doubt and confusions and embarrassments . . . save so much time. (p. 1)

Innovative uses of humour, farce, satire, allusion and a number of other powerful traditional and contemporary theatrical techniques such as cross-dressing, disguise, ritual, punning and the play within the play, disturb conventional expectations and disrupt the established patriarchal order.
When Shakespeare’s Hamlet warns Polonius not to let his daughter walk in the sun his words are ironic, yet the message is clear: a father should keep a tight reign on his daughter if she is to be kept away from the world’s taint:

HAMLET: Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to’t.

(Hamlet, II, ii, 76)

Whether this equivocal warning is against courtly intrigue or the specific attentions of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, is not important—choice in matters of carnal pleasure is denied Ophelia. Perhaps not without ulterior motive, Hamlet, Shakespeare’s tragic hero, adheres to the patriarchal convention which regards women as useful objects existing for the pleasure of men, to be both protected and mastered by them.

Unlike Shakespeare’s conventional heroine (who is totally shaped by and trapped within the romantic traditions and patriarchal structures of Elizabethan society), Ophelia in this play is given a chance to stand in the sunshine—to find her own way in a world that is still, however, beset by patriarchal constraints.

When Shakespeare’s Hamlet soliloquises on metaphysical issues such as “what a piece of work is a man?” he is confused, tortured, driven. Shakespeare’s tragic hero is inextricably caught up in philosophical speculation and obsessed with unravelling the haunting mysteries of life.

While Jean Betts’s Hamlet is also tortured and driven, he seems to know exactly what he needs and wants and has no interest in delving deeply into the intricacies of life and death, or of good and evil. Early in the play he takes it upon himself to speak for other men when he claims that they are “driven creatures . . . burning with overwhelming desires, tortured with deep longings” who need to be free to follow life’s “passionate mission” (p. 4). A startling assurance follows when he claims to know what women need and want. In his world, where patriarchy rules, gender roles are clearly defined and far from equal.
Betts uses her characters as ciphers for the play’s humorous sexist comments and to point up masculine subjugations of the female gender. Hamlet, for instance, has no hesitation in making hasty moral judgements:

HAMLET: Oh that I could find the woman’s part in me! For there’s no motion that tends to vice in man, but I affirm it is the woman’s part—all faults that may be named, that hell knows... (leaves distractedly) (p. 4)

We are aware that the humour in this dialogue derives not only from the transformed character’s irreverent recontextualising and distortions of Shakespeare’s words, but from the artifice and formality of his delivery and the subversive images it constructs. The comic tone and manner of Hamlet’s sexist judgements constitute a performance—a kind of play for the audience that has nothing to do with ethics, official games, or church laws, and everything to do with recreation and amusement. Appreciation of the humorous elements in the dialogue comes not only from the irreverent recontextualising and distortions of Shakespeare’s words (what is said), but from the way it is said, and the images the text constructs.

Betts’s Hamlet doesn’t get caught up in moral dilemmas, although he has a habit of feigning that he does: “Is this the temptation of the devil? Or God working in mysterious ways?” (p. 3) Unexpected biblical references such as this are sutured into a collage of familiar ‘texts’ to facilitate not only the play’s pastiche construction but its carnivalesque humour.

Shakespeare’s hero has been re-constructed by first stripping the character of his heroic substance and then filling the void with empty aphorisms of conceit. Hamlet’s self-important demeanour and put-downs of others are wittily framed and absorbed to enhance the audience’s perception of this character as a caricature.

It is not Hamlet but Ophelia who is confused, at least as far as her own identity is concerned. She is intent on grappling with the mysteries of fate, religion and sex, as they are served up to her (and to us) by Jean Betts in the play Ophelia Thinks Harder.

OPHELIA: Is there life before death? ... How come I turned into a woman? Can’t I stay a person? I didn’t want to be a woman; or a man. I didn’t ask to be either. It just happened ... People
Jean Betts’s play is hybridisation of comic events and utterances that rearticulate the suffrage phrase: "Don’t stand in my sunshine," 10 in a myriad of intriguing and subversive ways. The complex theatrical codes developed in Ophelia Thinks Harder are designed to draw the stage action and audience together in crucial and amusing interactions which unsettle established cultural norms. Actors and audience are forced to think, feel, or act or differently, when familiar codes no longer work and they are left with fragments of the known and unknown to be creatively pieced together. Betts’s text deconstructs established traditional theatre genres and social discourses by its humorous and subversive utterances, though its dramatic structure incorporates a number of traditional elements. Beneath an irreverent treatment of high art, culture and moral torpitude there is a carnivalesque dismantling of serious beliefs and ideologies, and an effective feminist agenda at work.

A theatrical collage of farce, satire, slap-stick comedy, classic references, literary and biblical allusion, Shakespearean language, and modern modes of address, puts this play’s intertextual ‘cribbings’ seductively on display. By mixing a hybrid collection of fragments from numerous known, or more obscure sources, with deeper concerns about gender and genre conventions, Betts produces a theatrical text open to multiple readings. The play opens up an active arena of performance and negotiation, where the main objective is to amuse or be amused, and where everyone participating in the theatre event is encouraged to “hear only what they want to hear” (pp. 7-8) and see only what they want to see:

    OPHELIA: You are very learned, my lord.
    HAMLET: And I can see you are hungry for everything I can teach you. (handling her) Your nose isn’t exactly as I’d like it. And I prefer a fuller bottom lip, with a curve like so—(p. 4)

In this interlude princely protocol is abandoned, and religion mocked, as the free, familiar contact of the marketplace takes over. Degradation, both

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10 This phrase was a commonly heard expression in New Zealand in 1993, the year of the centennial celebrations of women’s suffrage.
physical and verbal, brings out the ambivalent laughter of the carnival grotesque in Hamlet's contradictory utterances.

References to bodily appetites, his simultaneous humiliation and adoration of Ophelia, and his desire to change certain of her bodily parts reflect the ambivalent state of the popular grotesque as an as yet unfinished metamorphosis. Not only womanhood, but religion and the weakness of men fall prey to the mockery of ambivalent carnival laughter:

HAMLET: Oh my little black virgin, my temptress . . . (turns away suddenly, dismayed and desperate) Oh 'tis Satan makes men adore women! I must be strong! Let your thoughts fly heavenward, Hamlet; be not distracted from your purpose. (p. 4)

The capacity of the carnivalesque to degrade, materialise, and regenerate is shown in the play in Hamlet's (and other characters') attitudes to official Church dogma and in his view of the devil. The Satan who "makes men adore women" could be a character snatched directly from a medieval mystery play where the devil was a "gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum." 11

Like participants in the carnival, her characters do not comment ironically on established social systems and embedded inequalities. Instead, the ambiguities, inversions and contradictions colourfully and comically posed in Ophelia Thinks Harder work overtly to neutralise or rupture the power structures on which they are built.

The theme of the suffragette struggle against the power of the Law of the Father is brought to Ophelia's and the audiences' attention in a baffling confrontation in which three wise women enact a 'Macbeth-like' witches' ritual. Here we observe a major "decentering of the subject". The women, identifiable by number rather than by name, use collusory tactics as they attempt to revive Ophelia with a herbal tonic (a woman's drink) and restore to her sense of a personal female identity:

WOMAN 3: Drink it dear.
OPHELIA: What's in it?
WOMAN 1: Trust us, trust us, our wisdom is centuries old. . .

11 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p.41.
Ophelia drinks; it’s revolting; she lies back.

WOMAN 2: Read the dregs, Hecuba.
WOMAN 1: I see strife; I see gender war; I see the initial X.
OPHELIA: Gender war?
WOMAN 2: The women are stirring in the kingdom, Ophelia.
WOMAN 3: You know, we all know, that something is rotten in the state.
WOMAN 2: We know that it’s rotten.
WOMAN 3: Over and over we tell them; over and over and over, but will they listen?
WOMAN 2: All those men sitting around the council table.
WOMAN 1: We want to be there too to enrich the state with our instinct, our intuition—to bring our wisdom to the light of day.
OPHELIA: At council? You want a vote?
ALL THREE: (fists in the air) Yes! Shh . . . it’s the only way.

(pp. 25-26)

In this interaction between the nameless suffragette representatives and Ophelia, female subjectivity is both assertively foregrounded and tainted with a sense of powerlessness and loss. This splitting of the subject points to an ambivalence characteristic not only of feminist debate, but also of postmodern theatrical discourse and the carnivalesque.

To the often asked question “What do women want?” Margaret Sievewright’s words “We want men to stand out of our sunshine, that is all,” still have a striking resonance today. Betts’s play attests to this, but goes further in its carnivalesque evocation of positive feminist, deconstructionist, theatrical strategies: while the play text overtly dismantles established cultural, historical or religious tenets and ideologies (such as the cult of the Virgin Mary), it replaces these with revitalised concepts, designed to empower Ophelia (or make her think harder) as she struggles to come to terms with her expected role as a female in a patriarchal society. Questions of identity, integral to Ophelia’s struggle, are theatrically focused by techniques of role reversal and cross-dressing; gender reversals and shifting identities are marked by a plethora of constantly dressing and undressing characters, led by the ambiguous, outspoken courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Although the play’s parody and use of traditional modes (Shakespearean soliloquy, Rabelaisian carnival, classical mythology) operates at a superficial, rather than ideological level, its codes do, in Bakhtin’s words, celebrate

For Bakhtin, “Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal, it was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete.”

While Betts’s characters celebrate with a Rabelaisian drive towards becoming, change and renewal, their carnivalesque antics replace radical political protest with a more playful kind of ‘licensed’ subversion and theatrical release. This use of the carnival subversion is not simply a gross modernisation; neither is it purely negative satire, or fanciful farce, stripped of all human or philosophical content, as we might suspect when Ophelia’s utterances explode in unexpected blasphemies:

OPHELIA: Damn prayer; damn mothers, damn children, damn kings and queens and virgins—damn virgins! (She addresses Mary) Especially you, you sinless wonder! You sexless mutant! (p. 21)

The Virgin Mary is a target for Bakhtin’s laughter. Her exemplary status is more than a little tarnished when she becomes the focus of Ophelia’s verbal and visual attack. The subversive laughter provoked by this passage is not just an individual response to an isolated comic event. Informed by a strong feminist consciousness, it is forceful display of the carnivalesque—it is the laughter of the people... directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants.

Motherhood, family values, the ruling class, and the ideal of chastity are comically knocked off their pedestals by this rebellious diatribe. Ophelia’s hostility persists, losing impetus only when an unmistakably human element intervenes:

OPHELIA: One look at you and I know I’ve failed, every day, every minute... we try so hard to be like you—how about you trying to be like us for a change—give being a real woman a go, and see how you like it. (p. 21)

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13 Bakhtin, p. 7.
14 Bakhtin, p. 7.
15 See Footnote 7, above. Buzacott suggests a ‘dour approach’ has dominated modern writings and representations of the carnival, since Bakhtin’s analysis appeared.
Just as persistent is the sense of fun and carnival festiveness, relentlessly driving nearly all the characters’ performances. The kind of subversive strategies and releasing spirit that dominate ‘carnival time’, are abundantly demonstrated in *Ophelia Thinks Harder*, which constructs theatrical codes, a type of humour and a “special kind of communication” not possible in everyday life.\(^\text{16}\)

Betts’s text weaves carnival symbols and grotesque images into a complex tapestry of performance. A network of ambiguous codes makes it difficult at times to differentiate between bodily and ghostly characters, or force a wedge between everyday and imaginative worlds:

OPHELIA: Who are you?
ST. JOAN: My name is Joan. Joan of Arc. When I was alive no one would listen to me either—not until I heard my voices; then they took notice. But even then, all they were interested in was sainthood, miracles, whether I was a virgin. My mission was urgent—I had armies to organise! Yes, it’s tough for a woman to get people to listen. (p. 59)

Under the force of carnival laughter, disruption and sabotage, a political perspective is difficult to maintain, and defining the problematic line between material and immaterial existence takes on an aura that is far from metaphysical in this carnivalesque theatrical space that is imbued with subjects unsure of their status.

In this play language and dress codes are inextricably intertwined as ambivalences of cross-gender behaviour are theatrically explored. Disguise and display dominate the action, dissolve categories of ‘normality’, and draw attention to the concept of ‘performance’ which defines the structure, boundaries and processes of the theatrical event itself. Cross-dressing has a comically disruptive effect on the stage action, and on the audience, offering direct, and sometimes startling, challenges to existing cultural stereotypes and theatrical conventions.

Role reversal is Betts’s weapon for theatrical deconstruction of the patriarchal notion that sees women as ‘objects of desire’ and never as ‘desiring subjects’. This however is not a simple reversal of gender roles where male

\(^{16}\) Bakhtin, pp. 10-11.
protagonists are replaced by females striving for autonomy and control. When gender issues are looked at in this play boundaries between male and female power structures are tested, dilated or dissolved in some unexpected or hilariously comic way.

Gender identity in this play is externally constituted: it is assumed, put on, taken off, or acted out. Characters' assume, put on, take off, or act out their identities as easily as if they were garments to be tried on, made to fit or discarded. Identities shift and are encoded or decoded visually and verbally, through overt languages of dress, appearance or performance. The most duplicitous, bizarre and fascinating of Ophelia's carnivalesque attendants are the courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

A tour de force of theatrical performance strategy, studied contradiction and gender confusion is illustrated by Betts's introduction of her characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Skilfully Betts combines theatrical strategies that are 'old' and 'new'. Cross-dressing and women enacting male roles are well-established theatrical strategies, used effectively by Shakespeare himself. However, Betts adds a new dimension.

Traditional, subversive modes of cross-dressing, role reversal and disguise reach surprising levels of duplicity in these re-created characters. In their new guise, totally metamorphosised by Betts's novel reconstruction, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern serve up to the audience a rich and stimulating feast of entertainment and theatricality. Although imbued with the ambivalences and inversions of carnival laughter and postmodern and feminist subversions, this festive repast is rarely indigestible, never unpalatable and undoubtedly a theatrical treat.

In the first, Wellington Circa Theatre production, the parts were acted by Digger and Nudger (with their own existence in the Wellington women's comedy scene). 17 They were the women actors, Lorae Parry and Carmel McGlone, playing men. Betts, in the notes accompanying her play text, describes these characters as "the well known alter egos of two Wellington commediennes":

17 Digger and Nudger were created by Lorae Parry and Carmel McGlone for "Hen's Teeth" (a women's comedy revue). They later starred in their own show "Digger and Nudger Try Harder", co-written by Jean Betts.
DIG and NUDGE are two ordinary New Zealand blokes anxious to improve themselves by attending various New Agey courses—e.g. ‘How to find the Woman within!’ Hence their suitability for the particular responsibilities of their (re-written) roles. (p.1)

This play, imposes an intriguing theatrical and gender twist when it is revealed, to both Ophelia and the audience, that the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (played by women playing men) are “not men” but “sisters” (p. 55). Trying collusory tactics to win Ophelia’s confidence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage with the carnivalesque as they play a potent part in putting Betts’s theatrical and feminist strategies to work:

ROSENCRANTZ: Madam, you need not tell us what the lord Hamlet did—we saw it all.
GUILDENSTERN: It makes us angry too.
ROSENCRANTZ: We know exactly how you feel.
OPHELIA: How can you? How Can you know? Two men! How can I trust two men who tell me that if I choose to lose my hymen I will not lose my virginity? Ha! I must be mad! (p. 49)

The intertextual bathos of this Ophelia’s constant self-references to madness, ill health or failure to live up to the expectations of others, is brought to the fore by the studied comic interplay of these characters. In the first production their hilarious ‘op-shop’ 18 costumes, disguises and gender reversals were designed to disrupt not only Ophelia’s, but the audience’s expectations.

The gender war, a recurring motif of conflict and comedy in the play, is illustrated in a host of amusing and diverse ways. Cross-dressing tactics, humorously highlighted by Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s duplicitous masks, disguises and helpful utterances, continue to add colour and intrigue to the gender confusions which keep the battle of the sexes raging throughout the play. Gender conflict is the stimulus that keeps Ophelia “thinking” and on her toes, ready to leap in any direction as the debate advances:

GUILDENSTERN: And be careful—being female means you’re deviant before you start. Being a defiant female is intolerably deviant.

18 In the Circa Theatre production the play’s costuming matched its pastiche/retro/montage style. All the characters’ costumes were ‘put together’ from various pieces of second-hand clothing. This rag-bag assortment was totally in keeping with the ‘retro’ resonances and intertextual elements of the text.
ROSENCRANTZ: Burning hurts.
OPHELIA: But—why do men hate us so? They've got us where they want us, they've got power, we have none. Why do they still hurt us so much? (p. 46)

This parody of the gender debate is an effective attempt to move extreme and inflammatory gender oppositions into a position where male and female can be seen to co-exist. The audience’s inside knowledge of Digger and Nudger’s masquerade as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prevents them from entering too seriously into the debate. A theatrical space is created to allow the spectator of this charade, to delight in the allusive echoes of the dialogue and the humour of Ophelia’s responses. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are torn between their feminist beliefs and loyalty to their male personae as a discussion of male/female stereotypes gets under way:

GUILDENSTERN: Men have twisted women to fit their vision of ‘ideal female’—and now they don’t like the results!
ROSENCRANTZ: ‘They clip her wings—and then get angry that she can’t fly’. St. Simone. (p. 46)

Quoting an expert old ‘authority’ doesn’t enforce the logic of their argument or bring the quiet co-operation that they expect. Instead, when they decry patriarchally imposed oppressions of the female gender they receive an aggressive response that puts them on the defensive:

OPHELIA: All men are monsters! Bastards and monsters!
ROSENCRANTZ: Hey, steady on . . .
OPHELIA: Well of course you wouldn’t agree. (p. 46)

The duplicity of these characters consistently leads to amusing sequences, arguments, and counter-arguments with Ophelia. The audience, too, becomes entangled in the carnivalesque reversals and antics of the comic duo, as controversial gender issues are aired. Confrontations cause allegiances to split. We find ourselves constantly see-sawing between male and female perceptions of what it is to be a woman—or a man. Sometimes serious, sometimes cynical, contested issues are always presented with a sense of fun. The added ‘authority’ of documented, academic or historical evidence intensifies the subversive humour:

GUILDENSTERN: We found Adam’s last will and testament.
ROSENCRANTZ: It said ‘don’t believe Eve’s version’ (they laugh)
GUILDENSTERN: Eve didn’t fall; she was pushed. (laughing louder)
OPHELIA (*impatient*) But Virginity, virginity, what does it mean!! (p. 44)

The kind of inversions of hierarchical rank and toppling of established norms and dogma created during carnival time, are found in abundance in Betts’s stage world. Her play offers a temporary suspension from the norms of everyday life and constructs theatrical codes, a type of humour and a “special kind of communication impossible in everyday life.” 19 One of the most amusing and spectacular carnivalesque subversions of the play occurs when the Church’s obsessive views on chastity are revamped because they are seen to be “incompre-bloody-hensible” (p. 43):

OPHELIA: True to the self?
ROSENCRANTZ: A true virgin is a woman who chooses her own direction; who is submissive to no one, who is in charge of her own life, who allows no one dominion over her inner being...
ROSENCRANTZ: She is honest about her desires. She is free to take lovers or reject them. No one owns her. No one violates her integrity.
GUILDENSTERN: Virginity has got nothing to do with the hymen (p. 44)

The centuries old cult of the virgin, dismissed as “Mass hysteria; a lunacy epidemic” or a “nasty form of sado-masochism” (p. 43), is replaced by a new cult; these three female characters have found a valid reason to celebrate the reinstigation of healthy desire:

GUILDENSTERN: So let us drink to Elizabeth the first, powerful Virgin Queen of many lovers!
ROSENCRANTZ: And to Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons!
Who tore her lover limb from limb when he tried to steal her independence!
ALL 3: To virgins! (pp. 43-44)

Meanings shift constantly as contextual factors shift. Resistive and reactionary theatrical codes and strategies work together to suspend expected norms, and to collapse conventional boundaries. Distinctions between a ‘carnival time’ of the past and the ‘present time’ of the performance are blurred. In this play...

19 Bakhtin, p.10.
ambivalent carnival laughter subverts traditional hierarchies, and patriarchal systems are magically transformed by amusing and disruptive intrusions of the carnivalesque.

Ambivalent theatrical codings produce tension and create unsettling contradictions and misrecognitions, among characters and in audience perceptions. These tensions are sustained within an amusing continuum of predictability and unpredictability. Utterances and overt theatrical signs are ambiguous, interrogatory or contentious, and require a constant engagement with linguistic and visual surfaces, if the play's realm of 'extra coding' is to be entered.

Crossdressing and theatricality are symbolically linked throughout the play. Crossdressing sustains the gender debate by pointing up male/female ambiguities and contradictions in appearance and behaviour, while intermittent and unexpected 'stagings' of mini plays-within-a-play stimulate debate on related issues of class, religion, education or occupation. Both techniques are concerned with shifting identities and role playing. Costume is integral to theatre performance as it is a visible marker which plays a major part in creating or transforming a character's identity. Cross-dressing, like the strategy of the play-within-a-play is a coercive theatrical device for encoding gendered subject positions on stage, and for positioning the spectator in particular ways in relation to the stage action. The transformations brought about by costume, context and character in any stage performance are already potentially disruptive, both of gender identity and the symbolic order, which demand continuity and coherence. These subversive theatrical strategies overtly disrupt gender boundaries and complicate stage/audience interactions. Consequently, they highlight the duplicity of acting and its hazards as a social or theatrical strategy, or as a profession:

PLAYER 1: Latest voice warm up—we have to indulge these modern ideas.
HORATIO: Well, if that's the warm-up I can't wait to see the show.
PLAYER 1: We aim to please.
PLAYER 2: We aim to please too much sometimes, you are likely to find our exercises more interesting than our plays these days, Horatio.
HORATIO: Dissention?
PLAYER 3: Ah yes, there has been much throwing about of brains.
(pp. 32-3)
The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ are comically linked in this theatrical discussion as they are throughout the play. But as boundaries between traditional and contemporary theatre values are drawn there is a serious element to the light-hearted banter:

PLAYER 1: The old argument, my friend. Our younger, greener members long to be provocative and challenging—I prefer to eat; and so eventually would they, I’m sure.
PLAYER 4: Horatio, reason with him. The purpose of theatre is not merely to please?
PLAYER 1: The more you please, the more people come ...
PLAYER 3: Bums on seats. . . (p. 33)

The elusive question of what attracts audiences to theatre is explored in a carnivalesque controversy on ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. Comic utterance and concern over the relative values of traditional, elitist, and popular theatre intensify the debate:

PLAYER 2: But don’t you want any brains in the heads above those bums?
HORATIO: Elitist theatre!
PLAYER 4: So? So what?
PLAYER 3: I want theatres full too—but I want theatres full of people who like theatre.
PLAYER 2: If you try to please everybody, you end up with plays that bore the interesting theatregoers and then they stop coming! (p. 33)

When the Players throw out provocative lines like:

PLAYER 3: We’ve been trying for two months to recruit another actor. . .
PLAYER 1: It’s the pay that puts them off . . .
PLAYER 4: Acting is a vocation, like priesthood! A real actor doesn’t care about pay! (p. 34)

—we are clearly being invited to join a debate on the meaning and purpose of theatre:

PLAYER 3: What’s the point of attracting everybody to come, and then having theatres full of people who don’t really want to be there?
PLAYER 4: Watching actors doing plays they don’t really want to be in?
PLAYER 2: Plays so vapid and mindless that the only time the audience feels any real dramatic tension and excitement is when somebody forgets their lines? (p. 33)

By exposing the inequalities of class and gender through parody, festive laughter, spectacle and inversion, this play aims to celebrate the empowerment of women, and demystify the intricate dynamics of theatrical performance. The view that patriarchal law and order is dependent upon conformity and the binary opposition of male/female, is constantly challenged. Carnivalesque and postmodernist discourses, which seek to attack and destabilise oppressive bipolar divisions and systems, infiltrate the Players' and Horatio's discussion on theatre. Carnival inversion comes into play and artistic and cultural boundaries blur, as popular and traditional theatrical genres are overturned:

PLAYER 2: Musicals, domestic comedies...
PLAYER 3: ‘Physical theatre’, performance art...
PLAYER 4: Mime! (all groan). (p. 33)

On stage a self-reflexive, postmodern perspective dominates: Horatio stands in for the audience, the risks and joys of acting, performance, and audience participation are aired, while already established barriers between conventional and experimental theatre practices are tested, parodied, or broken down. After hearing Player 2 suggest that “theatre is questions and answers, feeling the social pulse; looking into ourselves; exploring our own culture” (p. 33), Horatio offers a ‘reasonable’ spectator perspective that is rejected as unthinkable nonsense:

HORATIO: Surely you must aim for balance—please and provoke and challenge at the same time?
PLAYER 4: Compromise? Never! (p. 34)

Player 4's response is a carnivalesque inversion, taking the form of a lighthearted ‘dig’ at essentialist ideas and fundamentalism. The play's underlying feminist agenda interacts with the carnivalesque in a paradoxical drive towards the ideals of freedom, creativity, individuality and ambivalence. Ironies occur when old theatre power structures and oppressive class and gender boundaries are attacked or redefined. Ophelia Thinks Harder constructs an entertaining site of tension and debate where nothing is closed off, no question is answered satisfactorily and where theatre is undergoing a
turbulent transformation, as it flounders between the poles of grim commercialism and artistic integrity:

PLAYER 2: We played to Fortinbras last week—he threatened to withdraw his sponsorship if we said anything remotely anti-war.
PLAYER 1: Well he’s a soldier for goodness sake! We’ve got to eat! And what a feast he put on, Horatio . . .
HORATIO: I’m afraid all we’ve got is warmed-up leftovers from the wedding breakfast.
PLAYER 3: All we seem to care about is keeping the sponsors happy. (p. 34)

Humorous historical resonances of Elizabethan theatre practice, with its support by generous and wealthy patrons, mingle with the implicit modernist concept of the starving artist in the attic, and contemporary notions of commercial sponsorship. As in carnival, all kinds of hierarchies are overturned or destabilised, to emphasise the unstable divisions between life and art, high and low, historical and popular concepts, and different modes of existence. Class and gender power structures and cultural differences are stressed by the comic juxtapositioning of traditional and contemporary theatre practices, as a skilfully contrived slippage between past and present and old and new occurs:

PLAYER 4: Caviar for the generals!
PLAYER 1: Horatio, please don’t encourage them—they’ll be wanting female actors next,
PLAYER 4: And why not?
(All laugh at Player 4). (p. 34)

The gender war surfaces again in another carnivalesque display. But this time feminist strategies of resistance are kept in reign by a double-sided symbolic mask, which does not disguise but protects. Anachronisms emerge as embedded theatre traditions are re-established. The oppressive ‘mask’ of authority represents both East and West. On its underside, however, it reveals a gender imbalance that connects with the contemporary audience:

PLAYER 1: I thought you wanted a discerning audience? Who would come to plays full of whores, do you think? And you, for one, would be out of a job! Only men know how to portray women realistically on stage. That’s one thing at least that the world can agree on. Look at Chinese opera . . .
HORATIO: Kabuki Theatre.
PLAYER 1: It would take years to train a woman to do it . . . (p. 34)

The play’s parodic comic thrust and theatrical politicising of the “gender war” is carried on here in a skilful attack on the theatrical convention that allowed only males on the public stage and condemned women in theatre to moral degradation.

Betts makes theatre spectacle and audience interaction a major focus for her social and cultural constructions, deconstructions and re-constructions. Through comic inversion, exaggeration and ironic exploitation of gender stereotypes, *Ophelia Thinks Harder* seeks to break down oppressive, hierarchical structures. Carnival is evident in divisive strategies continually used to disrupt fixed gender identities and traditional systems, which are normally maintained by holding on to rigid dualities. Carnivalesque intrusions do not distract in Betts’s play world. Instead they are purposefully woven into its intricate mosaic structure. Subversive strategies and carnival laughter blend with the play’s overlapping multiple themes, magnify intertextual resonances, exaggerate the studied artifice of the characters, and, above all, enhance the postmodern pastiche construction of the play.

In this chapter postmodernism and the carnivalesque have met vicariously in a boisterous, celebratory parade, yet the mystery of what it is to be a (wo)man remains. The carnival procession moves on. As the elusive spectacle of Jean Betts’s play world continues to stimulate and entertain, unresolved issues of theatricality and gender identity spawn further questions, based on paradox: Is it a mask? Is it masque? Or is it masquerade?
CHAPTER III  SELLING CARNIVAL

Lashings of Whipped Cream

She flaunts Debauchery and flirts with death, monsters who maim what they do not mow down, and yet their talons have not dared molest the simple majesty of this proud flesh.

— Baudelaire 1

Lashings of Whipped Cream: A Session With a Teenage Dominatrix, by Fiona Samuel, is a contemporary solo play written and produced as part of a festival of plays commissioned to celebrate a hundred years of women’s suffrage in New Zealand. It was first performed, by the writer/actor herself, for the 1993 WOPPA Festival. 2

Samuel’s performance piece uses humour to subvert conventional expectations about the sex industry and uncovers zones of resistance to the patriarchal ‘text’ of society. Issues of power and the contradictions inherent in the dominatrix role, and in solo performance, are foregrounded by a performance piece which looks at sexual exploitation and empowerment, and the debates surrounding the sex industry, in a fresh and subversively funny way. The appellation ‘teenage dominatrix’, the inspiration which led to the writing of this piece, holds a self-contradiction and a sense of incongruity


2 See footnote 1, Chapter II. The long title will be abbreviated to Lashings of Whipped Cream or LWC from here on.
which is theatrically explored and sustained by the text throughout the performance.

In this chapter I examine carnivalesque and postmodern performance from the representational perspective of the body as a cultural construct, a commodity, and a powerful site of social interaction. I present carnival discourse in contemporary women's theatre as an ambivalent terrain where its participant is both a powerful free subject and disempowered object of the game. This tension is present in the oppositional constructions of the sex industry and in the body as a site of anti-establishment resistance and exploitation.

A number of innovative New Zealand theatre practitioners, reflecting a global trend, 3 have used their artspace to redefine the ambiguities of the sex industry and publicly reclaim positive representations of the female body. The prostitute, the dominatrix and the stripper, usually pre-coded as manifestations of the exploited or pornographic body, enter this theatrical arena of resistance.

Leah Poulter's solo play "Kaz: A Working Girl" constructs the prostitute body negatively, as exploited. Kaz, the protagonist, is pre-coded as a victim—externally through social oppressions, and internally through her own limitations. "Strip", by Lorae Parry, explores the personal and professional struggles of three strippers from different backgrounds and with different dreams. This play brings out the empowerment/exploitation ambiguities of the sex-industry but at the same time theatrically constructs a positive site of agency for its three female characters. The feminist implications and issues of power inherent in the dominatrix role have been touched on in the performance work of Linda Earle and Nikki Heuberger. 4

3 A positive foregrounding of representations of the female body occurred in the 1980s in an explosion of subversive individual performance works as artistically disparate as Laurie Anderson's Empty Spaces, Karen Finley's The Constant State of Desire, Holly Hughes's World Without End and Carolee Schneemann's Interior Scroll. Today, though retaining its power to provoke or shock audiences out of their complacency, women's performance art has moved from intense, raw, direct emotional confrontation into the more complex, ambivalent space of postmodern theatre and multimedia performance. Annie sprinkle's performances have have undergone this transition. Her Post-Post Porn Modernist is a popular performance piece in which the specific conventions of pornography and the persona of the 'whore' are given an empowering and provocative theatrical agency.

4 According to the reviewer Judith Dale, in the theatre piece "Dementia Praecox", created by Earle and Heuberger, the Dominatrix role was examined in a script that was partly mime,
The term "sex worker" expresses an ambiguous identity. Discourses of empowerment/exploitation and representations of the prostitute, the pimp, the stripper, and the dominatrix slide back and forth in this ambiguity. Postmodern theatrical practice, provocatively employed in women's performance art, is a representational site where the ambivalence and subversion of carnival is most fully developed and contested.

The postmodern performance medium is the new, revitalised playground of sexual/political subjects such as the whore, drag-queen, transvestite, dyke, previously negatively coded as 'obscene' or marginalised as 'deviant'. Postmodern performance recontextualises the body as a powerful location of cultural interrogation and exchange.

According to Susan Suleiman—

> Everything we know about the body ... exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent.

This view of the body is particularly pertinent to representations of the body in the sex-industry, and provides a fertile ground for theatrical constructions and manifestations of the carnival.

My focus is on Fiona Samuel's dominatrix, the sex worker who most fully exposes the transgressive power and resistive potential of the body, and brings seductive new meanings to the concept of carnivalesque transgression. Samuel's play is a light-hearted exploration of the life of a dominatrix, whose daily activities (both professional and personal) humorously highlight the tensions and ambivalences of her work.


5 This genre is exemplified by solo artists such as Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley, who have brought their ground-breaking works, frequently dismissed or trivialised by the mass media as vulgar or weird, into the serious artistic terrain of theatrical performance.

In this play the discursive link of the sex industry to the carnivalesque has a
twofold significance: it emphasises material reality and the ambiguous
construction of the body, allowing space for a practical rearticulation of
the deviant body as a positive site of conflict and empowerment; it also
diverts transgressions of traditional cultural norms and hierarchies
(characteristic of both the sex-industry and carnival inversion) away from
negative connotations of the covert or secret, into the more expansive, visible
realm of public spectacle and theatrical performance.

Lashings of Whipped Cream constitutes the body through a theatrical
discourse of 'sexuality' which re-names sexual practices, re-constructs them,
and assigns them transformed values, meanings, and positions in the sexual
and social hierarchy.

An amusing paradox is generated by the notion of a bondage and discipline
expert, equipped with chains, manacles and vices, 'freeing' the body. This
provides the basis for the humour, dialogical discourse and grotesque
inversions that impregnate this play, and sets it securely within the affirming
domain of carnival laughter and spectacle.

This play demonstrates a bizarrely high degree of ambiguity in the
presentation of the dominatrix. The sameness/difference dichotomy adds to
this ambiguity by a sliding between the image of the 'sex worker' and the 'girl
next-door'—between the dominatrix body as exotic or different (as
contaminated other) and honest or ordinary, the same as 'our' mother,
daughter, sister or girlfriend.

Michel Foucault argues that deployments of power are directly connected to
the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and
pleasures. He distinguishes between sexual practices and 'sexuality':

Sexuality . . . is the name that can be given to a historical
construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but
great surface network in which the stimulation of
bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the formation of
special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and
resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with
a few major strategies of knowledge and power. 7

Sexuality in this play is certainly not textually constructed as deviant or a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp. It is just an ordinary part of everyday decision-making processes:

Well, people don’t have the disposable income like they used to. You have to make a choice, y’know, what to do with it, and I appreciate that you’re here, cos I don’t know if I’m a luxury or a necessity ... the jury’s still out on that one. I’ve been told both. (p.3)  

Samuel’s play continuously draws out the inherent links between theatre and the sex industry, and plays on its inbuilt grotesqueries. Carnival laughter, however, subverts and demystifies the ‘secrets’ and ambivalences of the dominatrix profession, and transforms its disturbing elements into an entertaining, releasing spectacle.

At first glance the audience sees a dungeon—a stage set complete with stocks, a rack, wall manacles, a whipping block and all the apparatus of the bondage and discipline trade. We have no idea what to expect, although we bring with us a few preconceptions about the sex industry and its workers. The first words we hear, from off-stage, give us a hint that our visit to this working place of a ‘teenage’ dominatrix may not be as unpleasant or disturbing as this initial spectacle suggests:

Sure. Sure. Same time next week, yeah, that’s fine. Now you have a lovely birthday, OK? And drive safely, there’s some strange people out there. (p.1)  

Samuel seems to be offering the audience an enjoyable, even festive, entertainment, a chance to catch up with this de rigeur world from a ‘professional’ perspective and to be entertained—from a safe, comfortable distance.

That’s our first misconception. When a flashy figure staggers on stage, clad in a homemade vinyl catsuit and shiny stiletto thigh boots, 9 we find it is impossible to observe from afar, as she draws her audience straight in:

8 LWC is the abbreviation used here for Lashings of Whipped Cream. The title is laden with metaphor and innuendo. It points at once to the carnivalesque potential of the play. The linking of food, sex, bodily appetites and a hint of physical violence with an image of luxury, extravagance and excess is a typical carnivalesque hybridisation of images.

9 This and further references to stage costuming are specific to the costuming for Fiona Samuel’s personalised performance of the dominatrix role in the original touring production of her play.
Well, normally I don’t do groups this big. (p.1)

We are immediately ‘trapped’ for a session in the bondage dungeon of a teenage dominatrix. She starts a head count of customers, tour operator style, but gives this approach up as a bad job.

Nah. No sorry, I couldn’t do you all. It’s for your protection as well, y’see, cos you wouldn’t all get a fair suck of the sav, you wouldn’t get what you paid for. (p.1)

‘Our’ dominatrix quickly decides on an alternative way to give her clients value for money:

So it’ll be more of a rap thing. OK? (p. 2)

A quick run down on the physical strains of her job leads to the ironic revelation that mundane concerns such as R.S.I. are an integral part of what is usually perceived as an exotic profession. Throughout the performance the play’s dramatic juxtapositioning of the exotic and the ordinary is designed to catch the audience off guard:

And my shoulder starts cramping after a bit, specially if people like it heavy. The guy who just left, Jim, no last names, he likes it heavy. And there’s the danger, the very real danger of me getting RSI if I go straight into another heavy session without a break . . . And you try getting accident compo in this job. Don’t even think about it. (pp. 1-2)

After this chatty reminder that this ‘exotic’ profession is merely a way of earning a daily living, we are gently urged to cooperate by a young woman who seductively exercises her talent to please:

Unless there’s an individual with a special requirement. I’d be prepared to consider it, but it means everyone else would miss out. Course, that might be OK with yous, you might be the kind of crowd that likes to watch. You get that sometimes, you get all sorts, hunky dory with me, whatever. So—anybody? Any special requests? (p. 2)

The theatre has become a bondage dungeon and the audience its customers. A sympathetic relationship is immediately set up by the dominatrix character
who makes it clear that she depends on her ‘clients’ not only for her livelihood but for her very existence. The play positions the theatre audience as customers, but as the lively interactions between stage and audience proceed a dialogic discourse develops, through which the audience helps create the dominatrix identity.

Her specialised work may not be familiar, but her language and manner are; the kiwi idiom seems to take the threat out of the unknown and demystify sexual deviation. The audience is still hesitant—unsure of whether they want to play this game until subjected to persistent cajoling and a sense of ‘shared vulnerability’:

Don’t be shy y’know, cos I’m warmed up. Like I say, it’d be better for me if it wasn’t the full monty, the heavy stuff, like . . . well, should I just give you a rundown of my services? Services and prices first, cos then you know where you are, OK? Cos sometimes it’s confusing, eh, if you don’t know what the options are? (p. 2)

Perhaps expecting to be titillated or shocked, we are coaxed into an ongoing actor/audience exchange, and introduced into the at once mundane and provocative working world of a young woman, who sees no need to justify her choice of job, or limit her clients’ options.

Too many choices, bit of a freak out. Like you get a menu in French or something and you think well, fuck, pardon me, but where do I start, y’know? So I’ll make it easier for yous. Right. Oh hang on, I’ll just stick the jug on. (p. 2)

The immediate impact of a larger-than-life costumed figure glistening garishly in a homemade vinyl catsuit and shiny stiletto thigh boots and brandishing a lethal looking ‘tail’ whip, while putting the jug on for a homely cup of coffee and conversation, ensures audience involvement. At whatever imaginative level the spectator engages with the performance, or views the dominatrix profession, a voyeuristic (or judgemental) distancing is difficult to maintain. Carnival rituals, laughter and manifestations of the grotesque explode distinctions between the high and the low, the familiar and unfamiliar, the real and the imaginary:

By the time they come to me a lot of these guys are just jelly, Y’know? They’ve been through it so many times in their head—what I do, what I wear, what I say. And I have
to suss out this amazing thing they've got going on in there, and I have to deliver. And I do deliver. (p. 18)

Thrust into the upside down world of the carnival, the audience is positioned ambiguously as festive participants—or paying clients successfully co-opted to join a session in a bondage dungeon.

My next one's due in . . . (she unzips her sleeve and checks her watch) Yeah, and you've got about an hour. That's enough for most people. And I do give discount for bulk. You gotta give value. (pp. 2-3)

Already built into the sex industry is the carnivalesque element which overturns or inverts usual social relationships and hierarchical structures of power, authority and class. Samuel's dominatrix creates a topsy-turvy world for her paying 'clients', involving them in a festive entertainment of sexual fantasy, images of the bodily grotesque and the release of ambivalent carnival laughter.

For the working dominatrix sexual degradation is both a rewarding site of exchange and the focal point for the exercise of power:

Well, there's your basic B and D—you all know what that is? I feel like a Sunday school teacher! That's bondage and discipline, which is pretty much what it sounds like, I tie you up and punish you. Physical punishment, I've got a selection of equipment as you can see, that's a good all-rounder and I can do that for you for a coupla hundred bucks. (p. 6)

Ambivalent symbols, puns and word-play, which are essential elements of carnival folk humour, bring out the immediacy of the present experience and highlight positive pleasures, such as the freedom to make choices:

Basic bondage and basic discipline both two hundred, reduction for regulars. See, you can split them up. Like the chocolate sauce and the hundreds and thousands, you don't have to have both. (p. 6)

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10 The process of carnival, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, generates laughter through a suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions, creating the sense of "a world upside down". M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984.
During this session with a friendly dominatrix carnival ‘acceptance’ and ‘suspension’ override the usual anxieties associated with unresolved social issues, at the same time as it draws attention to them:

Then there’s basic humiliation, and I personally think this is quite a sad one, cos let’s face it, you like to think that if anybody really wants to be humiliated, there’s someone close to them who’ll be prepared to do it for nothing. (p. 6)

Acts of humiliation and subjection take on a new aura. Distinctions between the ordinary and the unusual dissolve when degradation is ambiguously coded as both a basic human need and a formal ritual of the bondage and discipline trade.

Against several popular preconceptions of a sex worker’s activities, it is soon established that B & D rituals are more concerned with practical issues of power, control and fantasy, than sex. The mistress explains to her ‘clients’: “I’ll do anything to you, anything you want short of actual intercourse or cooking for you” (p. 21). Bondage and discipline may not involve sexual intercourse, yet it can be very ‘physical’, when heavy equipment has to be set up:

This is a shit hot rig. And it’ll take a full size man. Takes a fair bit of grunt to get them up there”. (pp. 18-19)

B & D also takes a lot of psychological energy: The thing I don’t think anyone really understands about this job is the mental challenge” (p. 23). And relationships can be complicated by the job, “if your man can’t handle the thought of you caning other guys” (p. 17).

Despite a few minor drawbacks, this work is promoted by the professionally trained mistress, as a rewarding career that can lead to both job satisfaction and financial independence:

The whole deal of a woman having a job and an independent source of finance, a bit of clout, well, a lot of clout in my case, but a lot of them don’t like it that much. You have to make a few rules. Like we did. (p. 17)

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11 A particularly satisfying aspect of her job is comically outlined by the dominatrix: “Golden shower two twenty five, I like those . . . cos when I was a kid I was a bit of a tomboy, and it always used to hack me off that I couldn’t piss standing up. So there is the job satisfaction there” (p. 7).
In defining the rules of the game (for both Neil and her clients) and holding the element of surprise as her trump card, the dominatrix takes control—not only of her own image as a woman, but of her character, her audience, and her theatrical space:

The first rule was about me having a room to work in. And he was bloody good about that, he helped me build all this... he's very handy. Made me that lovely horse. They sit on that and you tie them up like a chook. It's tempting to shove a lemon up their bums and call it dinner. No, no, I wouldn't do that. (p.17)

The image of an assertive, strong career woman who is in control, resonates against a carnivalesque mix of vulnerability and motifs of the grotesque. 12 Mimicked speech, rhetoric, and animalised images of the human body merge elements of medieval folk humour with images of popular culture. The audience is being seduced into a subversive, anti-establishment domain which separates them for a set, transitory time from everyday reality. This sense of liberation from everyday cares is part of the irresistible seduction of carnival.

Although her performance is overtly funny and relies on audience involvement, it both offers and asks for more than the slick jokes and contrived responses of straightforward stand-up comedy. There is a developed story-line and setting, yet this play's narrative has little to do with plot, and much to do with theatrical elements. It exploits the energies of the stage and recreates the codes of carnival, through both dialogue and action.

12 A pinnacle of popular empowerment and parody is reached in the comic utterance: "It roots your hair, this outfit. Wearing that head. I mean, look at it, it's got no life, it just sits there, it's... eeuuggghhh I am Catwoman, hear me roar. Woof". This piece of dialogue, (found only on p. 2 of the unpublished script, and in first performance text) engages with the carnival animal imagery of the grotesque. The last line parodies the opening of Helen Reddy’s popular song - "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar". The song hit number 1 on the Billboard charts in December, 1972, and established Reddy as a major star. In 1975 the United Nations used ‘I Am Woman’ as the theme song for the International Year of the Woman. Popular songs of the 1980s, such as Annie Lennoxx's "Sisters are Doin' It for Themselves", Cindy Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", and Madonna's "Material Girl" promoted powerful images of the sexual, rebellious, invincible or independent woman. By the 1990s international rock artists as varied as Janet Jackson, Sinéad O'Connor, Madonna, Diamanda Galás, Queen Latifah and Laurie Anderson have become involved in the writing, performing and production of their own works, which often deal subversively with a wide variety of controversial gender and social issues.
The mercurial relationship between the stage and audience is tested throughout this play by carnivalesque intrusions. Carnival laughter subverts established hierarchies and opens up a theatrical space in which unexpected reversals disrupt the complex network of codes that usually operate when a play is in performance.

Role-playing activities, theatrical settings, the props and decor of the bondage and discipline trade, are manipulative tools used to help the client to be 'transported into another world'. Any disquieting effects of imagined deviancy, violence or secretly ‘performed’ acts of submission on a client are eliminated when the audience is brought into the discourse and encouraged to take part in the session. In theatre, one can maintain a sense of reality in the face of temporary challenges to our existing assumptions through the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play'. Like Carnival, this dominatrix session, is a non-threatening, festive entertainment.

Carnival celebrations and spectacle, like most overtly theatrical events, allow participants to draw strict lines between performance and life. During the ‘time life’ of a carnival celebration, just as during the stage life of Samuel’s play, established norms and rigid polarities are simultaneously tested and overturned. This solo play makes its own spectacle by utilising to excess those innate, subversive elements in carnival that constantly attempt to contest or break down conventions that demarcate the imaginary from the real, or the deviant from the normal.

*Lashings of Whipped Cream* does not produce 'subversive acts' which can be contrasted with the real, but like carnival, constitutes its own liberating fantasy sphere—a symbolic, separate reality that cannot be readily assimilated into pre-existing notions or experiences.

Catherine Elwes suggests that, unlike film, theatre and live entertainment do not provide the perfect illusion necessary for voyeuristic narratives: the fact that the performer and the spectator occupy the same physical/temporal space makes more difficult the distancing needed for safe fantasising. She argues that, in such cases, successful voyeurism depends on predictable outcomes, on
the conventions of narrative form which presumably guarantee safety in 'looking.'

Reassurance that the client is in control, during a rundown on services and prices, is soon dissipated. Our hostess clearly calls the shots. We are confused as we join the young woman on her coffee break and listen to her casually chatting about the ominous-looking tools of her trade.

The audience, if Mistress Dominique is doing her job competently, is now warmed up and ready for anything. In a theatrical context it is not only spatial but temporal elements that Samuel's character controls. She unzips her sleeve and checks her watch:

Yeah, and you've got about an hour. That's enough for most people (pp. 2-3).

In that hour we are to be treated to a feast of learning, looking, light-hearted provocation and carnival laughter. We discover that foot fetishists are most often white collar guys, company car, little cards, rolex watches—"Never met a sewerage worker who wanted to be tied up and given an enema. Well, why would they need it, they're up to their eyeballs in ship anyway. No, it's the suits who want to lick these boots" (p. 5). Sharp business practice appears to be a priority for the dominatrix:

I make them pay extra too. I go "SLAVE! You're not worthy to lick these boots!" "If you want that kind of privilege you'll have to PAY, you grovelling lump of pond slime." (p. 5)

Going into a vivid description of master/slave rituals, our dominatrix tells how, just by making her voice go quite deep, she gets these men to grovel and do her bidding while she insults them:

I make them crawl to their wallets and get the money out with their teeth. And after they've paid up, I let them kiss my foot. That's the only contact with my body I allow, Y'know. They can kiss me up to the knee. They always want to go higher, like dogs, always a wet nose where it's not wanted, but only on the knee. That's it. I never have sex with them. And that's not just cos I'm engaged. (p. 5)

No sex allowed—and yet we are taking part in an encounter where we are being methodically and meaningfully seduced. This is the seduction of the audience which is a huge part of solo performance.

Even though the body here is not intended to produce fetishistic scopophilia, as in a striptease show, where the entertainment is it is offered as an object of exchange for another’s pleasure, the interchange between actor and spectator brings seductive elements into play. The dominatrix character’s physical presence on stage may not be erotic in the sense of ‘desire me’, but her seduction of the audience is assured in the sense of ‘enjoy being entertained by me.’

Public and private experiences constantly converge. Integral daily life seductively encroaches on the theatrical space of this dominatrix dungeon. Despite the insistence on rules to keep professional and personal lives separate, the dominatrix/entertainer delights in feeding her curious clients titillating titbits of information about her personal relationship with Neil, along with the more expected erotic detail of professional expertise and advice:

_She unhooks a whip from a selection on the wall. It is somehow different from the others, and beautifully made._

He made me this. Not many guys would do that, eh? Sit down and give you a hand like that. You feel it, it’s really silky, beautiful work. Hold your hand out? Now don’t worry cos I’m not going to hurt you, you haven’t paid enough. Just kidding. But I just want to show you how delicate this is. Just a stroke. Tiny stroke. Won’t hurt you. Promise. (p. 17)

Here the ritualised building up of the beauty of the object has a dual effect: it turns it into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous, and cathartically sheds restrictive images of patriarchal power and violence so that new, self-generated images may be embraced.

_She gives an audience member a tiny, soft stroke with the special whip._

That’s it, That’s how it starts y’know. Someone tells you

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14 A state in which the physical beauty of the object is built up, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. Fetishism can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone.
to hold your hand out. The belt, or the birch, or the jug cord. With some people, it sticks. It's just how attention feels... with some of them that's it, they just get excited. It's not really the pain, it's more the thrill of the chase. You are in the spotlight, you have the undivided attention, mighty! (pp. 17-18)

Irony and social comment find a new orientation—"But somewhere along the way, that turns into something that's looked on as a wee bit unusual. To like a bit of smack. You're supposed to want the good old (She makes a squeaky bedspring noise) in out, in out, no games, no spanking. What do you do?" (p. 18) We barely know what this business is about, but catch on quickly to the mistress's entertaining offerings.

Fiona Samuel has taken her material from real life. Ordinary everyday activities and personal experiences are melded with the potentially shocking revelations of a dominatrix's working life. The theatre is transformed into a dominatrix's dungeon, equipped with a 'mistress' and all the horrifying, yet alluring, tools of the bondage and discipline trade. Samuel's intention, as she takes a few risks and pushes her audience into tasting a darker side of life, is for her character not to repel or shock, but to titillate and entertain:

I used to make things disappear, y'know, pebbles, marbles... into the glove compartment! I couldn't piss up a wall but I could carry around enough change for an iceblock. (pp. 24-25)

The playwright/actor seems to be motivated by a desire to tell a fascinating story, which aims, through humour, to transcend everyday moral or critical judgements and elicit instinctive responses. Comparing herself to a bank worker, who also has a 'standing job', the dominatrix proudly proclaims she is expressing herself, doing something 'artistic', and is unable to justify the mutilation of "your only pair of feet, standing behind the counter at the BNZ" (p. 3). The dominatrix proudly points out the altruistic features of her job—the healing power of flattery, for instance:

People can never get enough attention really, never hear enough about themselves. Just give them a little bit of your time and they blossom like the sun. Fortune tellers, hairdressers, parlour girls, shrinks, they'd all tell you this. If people got enough attention, none of us would have jobs. (p. 4)
We cannot resist this street-wise philosophy, or fail to be touched and amused by her honesty and matter-of-fact dedication to the job. Personal feelings and professional priorities are quaintly entangled:

Honestly, if it’s a busy day, like today, I’m just chained to the—Honestly, I can’t get out of the place. Y’know? The phone’s going, and I haven’t got a secretary, I do it all myself, and if there’s a client waiting, they have to be kept happy, trussing up a 13 stone middle management type and give him full suspension, that’s no picnic, and bloody Neil, he thinks I can just run down to the dairy and get milk. (p. 4)

Even when it extends to the outside world—beyond the dominatrix dungeon—truth is bolstered by personal experience:

Y’know, it seems lonely to me, to pay a stranger to humiliate you, call me old fashioned, I try to make it a personal experience, but even so. And I shouldn’t say this, could do myself out of an easy hundred and fifty bucks here, but I reckon there’s quite a bit of humiliation going free just in your everyday life. (p. 6)

It’s not just Samuel’s or her character’s truth, but our truth that is unceremoniously exposed:

Y’know—you’ll be squeezing your bum into those togs that looked a bit high cut on the rack but who knows, maybe they’ll look amazing when you get them on, you’re wrestling them over your thighs and its looking very dodgy .... (p. 5)

The professional innuendo of “the rack” adds a gothic touch to the carnivalesque humour of “wrestling the togs over your thighs” and “it’s looking very dodgy”. This story brings humour to an embarrassing situation with which we empathise: “When, schwwinnngg, the curtain pulls back” and we hear the words “Can I help you?” our imaginations find us, with the dominatrix, “exposed under the fluoros” (p. 6). The familiar resonance of the “oh no, I’m fine thanks,” response (while feeling like a trapped animal) is quickly dissipated. The audience is once again caught off guard when theatre ‘as a commercial venture’ takes over the discourse:
And those salespeople, they don't charge for that. Still, I am a professional, so—two hundred dollars” (p. 6).

While experiencing the power of the performance of a young woman justifiably proud of her personal and professional achievements, audience perceptions fluctuate. These carnival participants move around in a slippery zone—never sure whether they are free, in control (as clients they are constantly assured that they are) or being controlled by the theatrical performance.

The theatricality of the B & D trade transforms the theatrical space into a dungeon resembling a medieval torture chamber, where dominatrix/customer negotiations are enacted. But there is more than one player creating this performance. By positioning the audience within the discourse of the text itself, Samuel invites us to become carnival participants, involved collectively in the creative process of making a spectacle. During this one hour ‘rap’ session, “‘our’ teenage dominatrix is created by the voyeurism of the theatre audience, just as her profession is created by its clients.” 15

Part of the fascination of this encounter with the dominatrix life lies in the playwright’s deliberate blurring of the boundary between the workplace and personal life. Not only is the audience given graphic descriptions of the professional activities of a bondage and discipline expert, embellished by the comic and colourful insights of the young woman’s personal experience in the sex industry, but they are also called upon to share the trivialities of daily routine and her deepest secrets. This juxtaposing of the familiar and mundane with the unknown and shocking has the effect of keeping the audience/clients off guard, despite the constant reassurance from the mistress that the paying customers are in control.

The audience is encouraged to join in a public exploration of the fantasy life that usually resides deep in the human psyche, and enticed to take the even more daring step of indulging in personal sexual imaginings. Expectations of

15 Judith Dale, Illusions, no 23, pp. 39-40. Dale claims that “the show locates the audience inside the moral, social and theatrical questions it raises. In particular, and pertaining to a one woman piece, ‘we’ as audience bring the character into being”. I agree with this succinct observation which illuminates the powerful interplay possible between the character of the dominatrix and individual audience members; it is an insight which effectively captures the essence of the play as a performance piece.
the exoticism of the profession are subverted when the dominatrix, insisting upon her client’s choice in the matter, explains her daily existence in this way:

—in terms of making a living, I’d rather be thought of as bog paper. Or a tea bag. One of those things you gotta have on a regular basis... Luxuries ARE necessities anyway, when it comes down to it. (p. 3)

The comic utterance of this kind of street philosophy, where acceptance overrides the need for justification, reduces the anxieties associated with unresolved serious social issues at the same time as it draws the audience’s attention to them. The dominatrix has the knack of transforming unanswerable questions into practical, clichéd ‘facts’, as she entertains and amuses the audience.

Samuel builds her character with confidence. The actor is positioned by the text to develop a direct interrelationship with the audience. Part of the power of the dominatrix role comes from her ability to entertain, to sell carnival. But this stage identity is dependent on the character’s ability to seduce her clients, who must be encouraged to enjoy being manipulated. ‘Our’ dominatrix opens up a theatrical discourse which transforms the potentially shocking, seedy world of the sex worker into a celebratory, carnivalesque display.

Beneath the openness, ease and enthusiasm for her work which flow through her colourful accounts and graphic demonstrations of the B & D world, there is a sense of tension and contradiction. There is a pervasive sense that life in the pursuit-of-pleasure industry (e.g. trussing up a 13 stone middle-management type and giving him full suspension) is not always a “picnic” (p. 4). Rather, the weaving of working rituals into daily routine is portrayed as a constant source of struggle.

Underlying ambivalences, inherent in the dominatrix role, and the unexpected juxtapositioning of the exotic and the mundane, provide much of the impetus for subversive carnival laughter in this play. Divisions between the bizarre and the mundane, necessity and luxury, reality and fantasy, high and low, pleasure and business, are constantly threatened. Role playing, acting out of fantasies, entertaining, to all appearances glamorous activities, have a natural ambiguity about them.
Acting or entertaining for the dominatrix fluctuates between a romantic yearning for a straight career “there are times when I close my eyes . . . and a big yellow light comes down on me and I’m singing . . .” (p. 25), the nostalgia of schoolday memories (when her disappearing act made her a hit with the boys at lunchtime (p. 24), and the grotesque reality and necessary discomfort of the present job. The ambivalence of the dominatrix position is continually exposed. An exotic stage costume that “doesn’t breathe” or “let out the bodily fluids” (p. 10), is no more a discomfort than having no milk for her coffee, because Neil “never remembers to get new milk” (p. 4). The dominatrix faces her immediate dilemma (of the sweaty outfit) head on, and forces the audience to do the same:

*She removes her belt and whip, and starts to loosen her corset.*

Makes of the body a giant condom. Maybe that’s why I feel like a dick in it. (p. 10)

The glamour of being an actor/entertainer is undercut by personal experience, and the comic tension arising from clashes of the exotic and the mundane. While the subject matter of this section, with its emphasis on the lower strata and bodily functions, is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s carnival, the style of stage/audience dialogue instigated by the dominatrix here, and frequently throughout the play, is that of a stand-up comic:

*No really, I quite like it. I used to wear this more traditional outfit, *Y’know*, the black lace camisole, the G string, the suspender belt, the stockings, *Y’know*, the trad turn’em on thing? Something very similar is lurking at home in the undie drawer, am I right? (pp. 10-11)*

As theatre, consensual bondage and discipline borrows its decor, props, costumes (chains, ropes, lashes, whips, maid, nurse, traffic warden uniforms) and its scenes (kitchens, prisons, dungeons, bedrooms) from everyday cultures of power. The surface ambiguities of mastery and submission signal the innate paradoxical structure of commercial B & D. In its cliched reverence for formal ritual it seems to demonstrate a servile obedience to convention, yet its emphasis on symbolism enables a re-enactment of social violations to the body and the psyche. The ambiguities inherent in playing a part or wearing an outfit to create or reinforce the illusion of reality as an
'entertainer', extend to the role of the worker and the experience of finding a suitable job. Memories of past experiences are a major contributing factor in determining a future path to be taken.

As a theatre of 'conversion' the bondage and discipline trade reverses and transmutes the social meanings it borrows, yet contains them within its own fantasy world. With its exaggerated emphasis on costume, acting and scene, this profession plays out social power as a coded, scripted performance, operating within the control frame of mutual consent and scrupulously defined limits, yet permanently subject to change. Because of its characteristic eroticising of scenes, symbols, contexts and contradictions which are not socially recognised as sexual—domestic work, boots, infancy, money, water, uniforms etc.—bondage and discipline activities can be thought of as the sexual organisation of social risk. During these rituals participants seek a witness to pleasure, pain, power or trauma. Fulfilling her professional role, the dominatrix acts as official witness to private anguish, and delerious loss of control within a situation of extreme control.

The reciprocal negotiation of scenarios and ground rules gives this business an essentially carnivalesque quality. Samuel's solo piece uses the inversions of carnival and its liberating laughter to show how shared understanding of constraints, and the use of key words or signals to indicate limits, are essential to the mastering of a control frame, in the dominatrix business, and in the theatre. Mutual consent in deciding the scene, the script, the costume, the fantasy, and in the exchange of money, is indispensable to the sensation of mastery over what may otherwise be terrifying ambiguities. The audience having consented to the suggested scenario and paid to enter the dominatrix's establishment—her professional 'theatre of conversion'—may be curious about what leads someone into this kind of profession, or even more curious about what goes on behind closed doors. Positioned ambivalently throughout the play, the 'clients' (though constantly encouraged to participate) have not been prepared for the subtly voyeuristic role that is thrust upon them. Personal revelations momentarily cast the spectator as voyeur as well as confidante:

A singer is what I would like to have been. I've never told anyone that I used to sing all the time as a kid... At school I used to be the entertainment at lunchtime. That and the story were the only parts I liked, the rest was just filling in time... (pp. 23-24)
When startling personal truths are revealed with an air of lighthearted confidentiality, for the spectator, there seems to be no point of resistance to cling to. Whether adopting the position of confidante, voyeur or amused observer, it is clear to the audience that Mistress Dominique has a profession, a stage name and the instincts and talents of a performer. For her, academic pursuits have never been a priority:

Oh, phys. ed. was OK, but I think that was where I started to go wrong as far as a career in straight entertainment was concerned. Y’see, I was always losing things. Always. And I lost my rompers . . . Well the teacher said it was OK, and I could tuck my frock into my pants, so that’s what I did. (p. 24)

The audience is again hooked in. Mere curiosity for intimate detail gives way to voyeurism. Totally collapsing the boundaries between work and play, adult and childhood experiences, the dominatrix gives an an impressive account of her schoolday traumas and escapades:

But one day after swimming, I lost my pants. Couldn’t find them anywhere. So OK, I thought, I’ll go without them. That’ll be OK.

And that afternoon we had gym . . . I knew I’d get in trouble. But sometimes, y’know, there’s a voice in your head, there’s a devil in your head that wants to stir shit up, doesn’t want an easy life. So off I go, barrelling down to the gym mats and OVER SHE GOES!!! (p. 24)

The perilous childhood memory of the dominatrix is not the memory of excessive punishment or loss of bodily control that seeks repetitive re-enactment by clients in her ‘theatre of conversion’. On the contrary it is a positive memory of empowerment—“The boys couldn’t get me in their gang fast enough after that, and I was very popular too” (p. 24). The graphic account of her disappearing act, and the pride she takes in telling her present clients about her nifty schoolgirl trick of making pebbles, marbles, two cent pieces . . . disappear wwhhssst . . . up into the glove compartment!” (p. 25)—convinces us that she found out where her talents lay at a very early age. In these childhood reminiscences there is an early hint of the astute businesswoman who is now negotiating with her theatre ‘clients’: “I couldn’t piss up a wall but I could carry around enough change for an iceblock.” (p. 25).
It's not just the money that attracts though, it is the mental challenge—the thing hardly anyone understands about this job. The challenge to the audience is at first implicit, then openly confrontational:

Not a lot of people could do this job. Probably from out there it looks easy, but it's mentally intense. It's acting really. It's just like acting. Like, I'm not eighteen. I'm actually 32. Yeah 32 . . . That's when you're meant to go, "Oh, you don't look it Mistress!" (She waits for a response) Oh, too kind. (p. 23)

The ingeniousness of her explanation for the deceit is in its double edge. Selling herself as 'a teenager' is better both for herself and her clients. Mistress Dominique's astuteness as a business woman shows as she offers the audience an entertaining personal insight into the importance of life experience, particularly for her profession:

But y' see, I got all these cards printed out a while back, the ones I handed out, and I haven't used them all up yet. And no one's ever complained. I think they appreciate the fact that I'm older than what I've said, cos you need a bit of maturity for this job, it's not for one of the school leavers. You have to know yourself, know the world . . . Have your life a bit sorted . . . (p. 23).

The audience may not share all her convictions, but is persuaded that she thinks of her present work and the acts she performed at school as a natural extension of the entertainment business "y'know, the singing and that, but it sort of took over a bit" (p. 25). There is no guilt, however, over her decision to pursue a career in the sex industry. It appears to be a natural development in her life, a borderless transition from schooldays to adulthood—in the 'entertainment' business.

The dominatrix makes a slim division between being a 'legit entertainer' and what she does now (p. 23). She sees the difference between public acting, or singing, under a spotlight, and her current job of entertaining 'private' clients as circumstantial: it amounts to her not having been "a bit more single-minded about pursuing that kind of career" (p. 25). Customers who see that the present profession has not masked her innate talent, tenacity and dedication, are not unduly surprised when she lets slip the 'real' reason she did not become a singer: "I dunno if the money's that good" (p. 25).
To recognise the theatrical elements of the bondage and discipline trade does not diminish the risks that may be involved in the profession. Our dominatrix is acutely aware that her domain is a theatre of risk. Within the demanding land of 'Fem. Dom.' 16 emotions can slip, indentities shift, memories and fantasies surface out of control. Here it is not unusual for mundane everyday chores and bodily needs to unexpectedly take over the scene:

Look, I’ve gotta have something substantial to eat here, my guts are rumbling. (p. 22)

_She fetches two donuts on a plate from a hidden tin, but before she can enjoy them, the phone rings.

Always rings when you’re . . . (She picks up the phone) Mistress Dominique’s House of Pain, can I help you? Yes, I do heavy bondage. Yes, I have a nurse’s uniform. Yes I can offer you an enema. What? (She looks at her breasts) 34c. Look. Is this a genuine call, because . . . What, right now? As we speak . . . type of thing? Well if you really want to know, caller, I’m looking at two donuts filled with lashings of whipped cream and I’m trying to decide, which one I shall bite first, the longy or the roundy? Cos I’ve got this theory, caller, and . . . Hello?

(She puts the phone down)
Another one bites the dust. S’pose I shouldn’t have told him about the donuts. (p. 22)

Saturated with innuendo, ambiguity and a fascinating hidden agenda, this scene highlights the theatricality of a profession where ‘acting’ is a basic demand of the job, and links the title of the play with its major metaphor—the two differently-shaped doughnuts filled with _lashings_ of whipped cream. Throughout the play there is a carnivalesque linking of sex, bodily functions and food, with other less obvious appetites, or with inanimate objects.

The comic interplay of competing desires and images of grotesque realism offers the opportunity for the imagination to soar. But the audience seems always to be on the back foot when it comes to ingenuity and imagination. A mysterious search interrupts the dialogue for a moment. There must be some important piece of equipment missing . . .

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16 Colloquial term for ‘female domination’ used within the sex industry.
Scuse me, I just . . . Where is it?

She continues to search, with increasing desperation. Her story has upset her.

Where is it??

She drops to her knees, scavenges underneath the chair and retrieves a bag of Mini Moros.

Well I'm hungry. I love these. Sexy little buggers, aren't they? I like the way they come individually wrapped, all done up in the shiny black. You can see a bit of a resemblance eh? Eh? (p. 14)

Intermingling of the exotic and the ordinary continues as the dominatrix, sprawling in her arm chair ready to bite into the huge cream-filled donut, explains that the disappointed caller probably pictured her in front of a mirror “rubbing baby oil into my 49 inch chest.” (p. 22) The mistress insists on keeping things impersonal and professional. Throughout the duration of our intimate session with her she never gives her first name, but she does show her vulnerability:

... about this time of night you become aware that you're feeling a bit poked and you just can't be bothered pretending any more. So if I'm looking a donut in the eye I'm gonna say so. Another reason to be self-employed. (p. 22)

A final challenge is held out to the audience as they manouevre the seductive and treacherous climes of a session with a dominatrix. Like Eve with the serpent the audience is tempted, but the coveted apple takes another form as a special theory about gender origins and donuts is spontaneously proffered:

Y'see, you may have noticed there's your two basic types of donut. The longy and the roundy. The longies are . . . ooh, about—so long, and for reasons of my own, call me unusual, but to me they represent the masculine. And the roundies have a split down the middle with all the jam and the cream and whatever, and to me . . . they represent the feminine. (p. 25)

The sexual symbolism is explicit, but the 'free' lesson creates for the audience a comforting sense that this is a carnival game rather than a heavy session
with a bondage and discipline expert. ‘Rap’ talk is seamlessly mixed with practical observation and amusing philosophising:

So—there’s your two basic principles, right, and they do share a basic similarity because, let’s face it—they’re both donuts. But—they are also different . . . and Why are they different? . . . WHY did God make a thing different that could have been the same? (p. 26)

The clients are fully engaged in the performance as this carnival festivity, with a flavour of stand-up comedy, continues:

And my theory is . . . God, whoever, the big O, the thing, wanted them different. Because there should be choice . . . Eve chose to eat the apple in the Garden of Allah—no that’s a parlour I used to work in, Eden, the Garden of Eden, right!—as soon as she bit on that apple we were all fucked. Those weren’t the actual scripture class words but that was the drift. (p. 26)

Choice—wouldn’t we all have done the same? Wouldn’t we rather:

. . . eat of the Tree and know good and evil, rather than running round in the nuddy . . . for all eternity like some spoon without a clue”? (p. 26)

These questions remain unanswered, but the donut has developed an unforgettable ‘aura’ as the street smart philosophy of the dominatrix finds its mark:

Make your choice and see what comes. More than one suck of the sav. More than one way to get the cream. Choice. That’s why there are two kinds of donut. (p. 26)

The bondage and discipline trade doubly disrupts everyday hierarchies, perceptions and balances of power, by collapsing divisions between high and low, deviant and normal, pleasure and pain, animate and inanimate worlds. Lashings of Whipped Cream exploits the interplay of mastery and submission that signals the paradoxical structure of commercial bondage and discipline. In its clichéd reverence for formal ritual, this business seems to demonstrate a servile obedience to convention, yet, like carnival, an emphasis on game-playing, fantasy and ritual symbolism transforms anti-establishment subversion into non-threatening, non-violent pleasure.
Carnivalesque reversal underpins Samuel's solo play text as she weaves a tapestry of the ordinary and the forbidden which is a site of rich interaction for both the dominatrix and her theatre clients. In this performance piece, Samuel reverses the process whereby the ordinary produces and contextualises the forbidden. Her subversive strategy of using the forbidden to recontextualise the ordinary, deterritorialises both the erotic secrecy of the dominatrix profession, and the mundanity of everyday existence, and displaces dominant cultural myths about sex workers as victims and the female body as an objectified commodity.

Carnival transgressions and ambiguities persist as the performance text displays its own inbuilt contradictions. Viewers are constantly situated in the dual position of voyeur/confidante, or theatre spectator/dominatrix client, unsure of where and when boundaries between stage and audience, illusion and reality will be crossed. In the dominatrix performance there is a conscious crossing and re-crossing of the line between the sacred and profane, and a carnivalesque elision of critique and burlesque.

The dominatrix is a performer who refuses easy categorisation. She is an artist, presenting a particular female body, the body that dominant discourse views as 'obscene' or 'other'. Yet she is more than this body acting, speaking, coercing. She is many things at once—Mistress/girlfriend, caregiver/seducer actress/businesswoman, social/political commentator, teenager/erotic, sexual being. Theatrical manifestations of carnival here re-stage publicly the dynamic power relations and interdependencies which operate in the sex industry purely for personal pleasure. In Samuel's performance piece, both the power dynamics of the sex industry, and the dialogic discourse of stage/audience exchanges, are re-staged and re-invented, through positive, revitalising carnival humour.

Collapsing the boundaries completely between the phenomenological and stage worlds, and between time zones, Samuel's dominatrix completes the B & D session with comic flair. Her clients' agreed upon time is up, and a ring at the door lets us know that Jeffrey's arrived to be trussed up before she winds up her working day:

She quickly restores the dungeon to pristine order, tidying away all evidence of her free time and restoring her appearance. Business As Usual is about to recommence.
Now, we were a bit light on the practical, but that was your choice, that's the word, and if any of you want to come back for an individual, bit of a one on one, you know where to find me. You’ve got the cards, right? Don’t lose them. Tell all your friends! And drive safely, OK, there’s some strange people out there (p. 27).

The ambiguities inherent in playing a part, wearing a disguise, stage costume or some other form of symbolic mask, reinforce, for both the dominatrix and her clients, the illusion of reality as ‘entertainment’. The dominatrix character excels in the business of entertainment. She is marginalised as sex worker who knows all about degradation, abuse, discipline and punishment, but empowered as an ‘actress’ who can seduce her audience, a professional who can sell her product and please her ‘clients’. And, she enjoys the limelight:

To tell you the truth, I think I missed my calling.
I think I should have been an entertainer.
Legit entertainer, I mean. (p. 23)

She sells sexual desire and fantasy—but not her body. She is not a professional entertainer but she entertains. This character is a modern woman but calls herself ‘old-fashioned’. She disrupts established norms but draws attention to the rules. She plays a serious game but makes us laugh. She sells Carnival.
CHAPTER IV COLD CARNIVAL

Daughters Of Heaven

Folly, vice,
Extravagance in gesture, men, and dress,
And all the strife of singularity—
Lies to the ear, and lies to every sense
Of these, and of the living shapes they wear.
There is no end.

—Wordsworth

Daughters of Heaven, by Michaelanne Forster was inspired by the infamous Parker/Hulme murder and trial. 2 This play, in reconstructing the conditions and events surrounding the actual murder of a mother by her teenage daughter and a friend with whom she formed an intimate and obsessive relationship, is aligned immediately with the subversive and the marginal. 3 The inherent features of murder (the ultimate subversive act) and the suggestion of lesbianism (a marginalised sexual orientation) are important links to the carnivalesque.

Like the other plays explored in this study for their carnivalesque potential, Daughters of Heaven creates a separate anti-establishment discourse. In Forster's work however elements of carnival have a more complex form and

1 William Wordsworth, Prelude, 1805, VI, 571-76.
2 This play was commissioned by Elric Hooper who directed its first production at the Court Theatre, Christchurch, October 1991. After performances in Wellington and Auckland a revised version of the play (the published text) was performed in October, 1992, at the Globe Theatre, Dunedin, directed by Lisa Warrington.
relationship to the text, characters and audience. They operate in a stratified, shifting ‘reality’, and produce notably different effects.

While ‘subversion’ and ‘marginality’ are implicit in the text and provide fertile conditions through which the process of carnivalisation can take place, this process is directly connected to theatrical manifestations of the Fourth World.  

The two protagonists, Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker, portray a strong sense of ‘belonging to another category’. This sense is dramatically articulated through the imaginative construction of a ‘Fourth World reality’—a space created by the characters themselves, where they play out romantic fantasies and which they believe guarantees them “the key to radiant life and truth everlasting” (DOH, p. 68).

The title “Daughters of Heaven” and references to “Heavenly Creatures”, “Paradise”, “our own map of Heaven”, “our sacred vow”, “the saints”, “temple of the gods”, “spirits of the Fourth World”, a “sky unfettered and stretching to eternity”, suggest a dimension of existence far removed from the secular material world of medieval folk carnival. Such a focus on the spiritual seems, on the surface, to negate the immediacy and earthy vitality of the carnival spirit. Yet a paradox invoking the hierarchical inversion of carnival emerges directly from the idea of ‘celestial beings’ in search of earthly freedom, love and happiness:

**JULIET:** Gina! Look there! Shadows of angels on the waves. Twenty-three celestial beings. She touches PAULINE. Twenty-four.

**PAULINE,** touching **JULIET:** Twenty-five. (p. 68)

To the psychiatrist’s comment that other people might see this vision as part of a delusion Juliet’s response is assured:

**JULIET:** They don’t matter. Gina matters. I matter. That’s all. We have the right to do what we needed to do in the interests of our own happiness. (p. 68)

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4 The term “Fourth World”, even when not given this specific designation in the text, is used inclusively throughout this discussion. It refers to all scenes and incidents in which the imaginative life of the two teenage protagonists dominates the theatrical action, and disrupts established cultural and social norms.

5 DOH is the abbreviation used for Daughters of Heaven. Further page references to the published text will appear as bracketed numbers only.
Exaltations of a spiritual 'elite' dissolve into expressions of human love in the poem created by the two schoolgirls to evoke their exalted state in the Fourth World:

BOTH [J&P]: I worship the power of these lovely two  
With that adoring love known to so few.  
'Tis indeed a miracle one must feel  
That two such heavenly creatures are real. (pp. 58, 87)

Dramatic tensions develop when the rewards of the upper spiritual world are shown to be inexorably linked to compulsive human instincts and desires. The complex 'Fourth World reality' of this play creates conflict, contradictions and ambiguities that are culturally and socially distorting and disruptive. These align the energies of the imaginative 'other' world of the play more closely with the subversive striving for happiness of the suspended world of carnival release, than with any distant, unifying spiritual quest for 'eternal life'. The subversive and ambivalent structure, images and effects of Juliet and Pauline's covert Fourth World existence illustrate both a playful separation from oppressive social constructs and a vivid reminder of them:

BOTH [J&P]: There live among us two dutiful daughters  
Behind their masks are two beautiful daughters  
The most glorious beings in creation  
They'd be the pride and joy of any nation.  
... Compared with these two all men are fools  
The world is most honoured that they should rule. (p. 45)

The 'inner sanctum' scenes, in which carnival spectacle and romantic inversions secretly disrupt hierarchies and temporarily transgress cultural norms, are a vivid reminder of Umberto Eco's dictum: "Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible". 6

The historical setting of this play, based on a true story, is Christchurch, New Zealand, 1954-1959. Act 1 begins with an Act of Contrition, spoken by Pauline from her prison cell in Christchurch. The girls, imprisoned separately since October 1954, have been transferred to the prison cells of this setting in preparation for their release. The prayer is interwoven with the equally formal and spiritually oriented dialogue of Juliet, who speaks to her friend from her own cell:

6 Eco, 1984, p. 6.
PAULINE: O my God, I am heartily sorry—
JULIET: My dear one. I am dictating this to you through
the spirits of the Fourth World, per usual.
PAULINE:— I am heartily sorry for having offended thee ....
(p.17)

The dramatic impact of this opening can be attributed partially to the scene’s juxtaposing of a symbolic austerity with an elusive spirituality. On stage, the separations of distance and time collapse in the interweaving of the prayer with Juliet’s address to Pauline. Past dissolves into present as Juliet attempts to shut out the harsh reality of the outside world, in a pleading reminiscence:

JULIET: I want you to remember Paradise. It was ours once.
We created our own map of Heaven. Haven’t I learned
the hard way in this shit-hole of a place that is all there is?
Our Heaven and the two of us? (p. 17)

But there is promise and hope in this lingering reminiscence. The sense of disillusionment that comes through in this dialogue is overshadowed by a determination not to give in, and a strength of will that does not allow for remorse. In Juliet’s eyes present circumstances are not a deterrent to future aspirations.

PAULINE:— and I firmly resolve, by thy holy Grace, never
more to offend thee and to amend my life.
JULIET: Now that I have been brought to my knees I see my
own star brighter than ever. I will never give in. I will
never regret. It is our fate.
PAULINE: Amen. (p. 17)

Pauline’s prayer completes the counterpointed dialogue which draws attention to the collusive intimacy between the girls. The dramatic structure of this brief piece of interwoven dialogue allows a building of imaginative intensity as the spectator is placed simultaneously in a position of privileged access (to the intimacy of the teenagers’ relationship), and as naive observer.

The emotional intensity set up between the girls is vital to the dramatic heart of the play, as are the ambiguous questions their relationship raises. Their obsessive relationship seems to have survived over a great distance and a time span of five years. But—does it continue? If so in what form? What was the true nature of their adolescent relationship? Were the girls
lesbians? Were they mad or bad? While the play does not attempt to provide answers to these questions, its dramatic tensions evolve from a theatrical 'airing' of these and other relevant controversial issues.

Although the main characters have been glimpsed from the inside, we are offered no more than a hint of the crime for which they are being punished and for which Pauline is asking forgiveness. The play works to manipulate expectations. Juliet's extravagant claim that she is "dictating" to Pauline "through the spirits of the Fourth World" and her passionate allusions to "Paradise" and "our own map of Heaven", create curiosity, and a sense of uncertainty. Remaining distanced from the event that shook a complacent, conventional community, and sent shock waves around the world, is not an option for the audience of Forster's play. The play does not locate the past safely in the past. It implicates the contemporary audience in the controversies and public responses of the time, while forcing them to make their own judgements. From the opening of the play imaginations are engaged as the dramatic focus is placed surely on the intense teenage friendship, the complex relationships and circumstances that lead to and follow a shocking violence, rather than on the horror of the crime itself.

*Daughters of Heaven* is structured to allow the emergence of several levels of stage action and many different and often ambiguous viewpoints. It operates on three defining yet interacting levels. The present action of the play is interwoven with a double, retrospective and confrontational narrative structure.

Alan Brown, the prosecuting attorney, provides the simple narrative by establishing the legal facts and external circumstances of the case. Another outside observer, Bridget O'Malley, the Hulmes' housekeeper, provides a different kind of narrative thread. Both characters are instrumental in creating the multiple perspectives offered by the text and in drawing the audience into the imaginative action of the play. Scene Two briefly introduces the two characters responsible for the narrative development of the story, placing them in the settings from which they make most of the observations which they pass onto the audience throughout the play. The narrative action fluctuates between Brown's commentaries from the courtroom and Bridget's confidential asides to the audience.
Bridget’s running commentary on the main events of the play (the lead up to and after-math of the murder) and on the intrigues of the girls’ relationship and behaviour, has a dual purpose. She is a vehicle for the expression of small-town opinions attitudes and prejudices manifest in the city of Christchurch in 1954. This busy-body who emanates an aura of personal bigotry, disapproval of non-conventional behaviour, lack of intellectual insight, superstition, and outspoken but misguided forthrightness, is one of the most controversial and dramatically forceful characters in the play. When the imaginative intensity surrounding the girls’ friendship and its tragic repercussions rises to a pitch, Bridget steps intrusively into the action with a provocative comment that not only elicits audience response but which brings with it an undertow of comic relief. Our first encounter with her sets up a collusory relationship, dissolving the traditional stage/audience barrier. She speaks confidentially and directly, as both an outside observer (a member of the public) and from her personal experience as a former employee of Juliet’s parents:

BRIDGET, addressing the audience: The ‘domestic tragedy’ was how Mrs. Hulme referred to it after. That and ‘Juliet’s illness’, as if wickedness was something you caught from breathing bad air. But I didn’t blame her. Not much. In the beginning we were pals. (p. 17)

This amusing perception sets up an immediate ambivalence. Whether her ‘chumminess’ with Hilda is wishful thinking on Bridget’s part or a means of self-aggrandisement, it is a point of view which rapidly changes:

BRIDGET: Hilda was the one you had to watch out for. I soon discovered that. She talked equal but she acted like a Queen Bee—until her daughter was arrested for murder. (p. 18)

Bridget’s unsuppressed glee at Hilda’s tragic circumstances is combined with a fluctuating point of view about her own personal relationships. The initial dialogue brings up the horror surrounding the girls’ activities. Her mention of Juliet’s “wickedness” and her being “arrested for murder” gives some indication of her personal traits and her derogatory attitude towards the girls and Hilda, but it is the setting up of a collusory relationship between Bridget and the audience that illustrates most significantly the provocative and ambivalent function she is to perform in the play. Her role within the Hulme household is that of housekeeper. She is a fictional composite of
several 'home helps' employed by the family and plays a key role in defining the boundaries between audience and stage action throughout the play.

Within the Hulme household Bridget’s role is also a vital one. Here she is situated as a more intimate observer of Juliet and Pauline’s teenage escapades and intensely growing relationship. She knows more about their playfully subversive activities than either of the parent couples. Her role as 'go-between' provides a theatrical link between the girls’ families. Bridget’s frequent criticisms of both the Hulmes and the Riepers, and their perspectives and attitudes to life, love and their daughters' relationship, ironically points up the power imbalances between the working class Rieper family and the upper middle-class Hulme household. Throughout the play the intricate, dynamic interactions between the two girls and the other characters who help to develop their story dramatically, are highlighted by the constant interference of Bridget O’Malley. Bridget’s scornful repetition of Hilda Hulme’s euphemistic description of her daughter’s behaviour as “Juliet’s illness”, loses its impact when she just as forcefully explains that she and Hilda were “pals”. Contradictory comments such as these continually point up the housekeeper’s social aspirations.

The following action places her in a different theatrical space and time. She has moved back into the Hulme household, into the stage space which defines her ‘domestic role’. The audience is transported with her back to the pre-trial period, but distanced enough to be able to draw their own conclusions about her initial ‘settling in’ and the kind of relationship she had with Hilda Hulme. Bridget’s view of this early friendship doesn’t appear to coincide with Hilda’s, who is merely doing her social duty by welcoming the ‘home-help’ into the Hulme household:

HILDA: I do hope you’ll be happy here. . .
BRIDGET: You’re too kind, Mrs Hulme, really.
HILDA: No, Hilda. Please. You must call me Hilda. We don’t stand on ceremony in this house.
BRIDGET: In that case please call me Bridget.
BRIDGET: Thank you, Hilda.
HILDA: I’ll leave it to you then. Bridget.
BRIDGET: Right Hilda. (p. 18)

This scene gives a brief taste of the play-acting roles most of the characters assume. Hilda, like her daughter has an acting talent which is displayed as
part of her everyday reality. Her upper class facade creates an atmosphere of sterility and elegance that is one of the many theatrical markers of the class and educational inequalities between Juliet's and Pauline's families. Hilda's apparently generous offer of supplementing Bridget's flat with "plates, cups, saucepans" or anything she might need from their own kitchen (p. 18), subtly points up a difference in living conditions between the housekeeper's flat and the Hulme 'mansion'. The superficiality of Hilda's friendly suggestion that she and Bridget address each other on a first-name basis is not missed by Bridget:

BRIDGET: Bridget, Hilda. Hilda, Bridget. We sounded like a couple of chooks at the back gate. Her husband Henry was Cambridge educated. Couldn't understand a word he said. (p. 18)

Bridget's comic observations have carnivalesque quality. The humiliation and comic abuse of those in a higher social stratum by the lower classes is a hierarchical inversion typical of carnival. This levelling out of high and low is evident both in the human/animal reversal and in her mockery, which certainly is not without basis, as Henry's opening dialogue demonstrates:

HENRY: Would you mind terribly keeping whatever delectable morsel you conjure up warm for me until I return? (p. 18)

Henry's education and class do not prevent him from being constructed as a caricature. In this play he too wears a 'theatrical' mask and his language use shows that he engages in the excesses and distortions of carnival. Another theatrical performance is enacted when Hilda tells Henry she is leaving him for a younger man Walter Perry. Henry tries to draw Hilda into playing a "childish game" (p. 33), when he suggests sarcastically that he might: "Challenge Sir Walter to a duel" (p. 34). Masking a sense of helplessness and defeat, his final thrust is an utterance which mixes cynicism with the animal imagery of grotesque realism: "I'm prepared to be civilised. Help yourself, Walter. Eat my roast beef. Roger my wife—" (p. 34). Henry's use of food imagery is particularly carnivalesque in its juxtaposition of colloquial language with artificial, articulate speech:

BRIDGET: If you'll excuse me I'll see to the roast.
HENRY: Please don't let me stand in the way of your rendezvous with the roast. But what about slipping me a water biscuit on the sly? I'm famished. (p. 32)
Bridget’s dramatic function in the play is pivotal. Her ambivalent commentary and actions place her both in the gender position of supporting the phallocentric rigidity of law and order, while they create a specifically female subject position which intersects and collides with the other carefully constructed female subject positions in the play. Although working class herself and ‘a member of the Hulme household’ she does not hesitate to judge Juliet and her family harshly or to demean Pauline for her lower class background. Hilda treats Pauline in the same demeaning way when she returns Pauline’s compliment on her own appearance with a cold “Thank you. That tunic suits you too” (p. 23), or comments, as she makes a sweeping exit:

HILDA, stopping at the door: Oh I almost forgot—your mother rang.
PAULINE: Yes?
HILDA: She said—could you pick up a pound of sausages on your way home. Bon soir. She goes out.
BRIDGET: What a pity. Pauline will miss my nice roast chicken.
(p. 23)

Both girls see their own families as repressed and uncaring, though Pauline considers Juliet’s family as an ideal substitute for her own. Bridget’s own narrow perceptions, prejudices and harsh judgements tend to draw out prejudices and distortions in other characters’ perceptions, and constantly bring the audience into confrontation with the narrow and often contradictory values of the repressive society of the time. Her paradoxical attitudes and behaviour can be viewed as both conventional and subversive, but as the play progresses it becomes clear that no simple assessment of her actions or judgements of others is possible.

This play clearly utilises postmodern strategies, and at the same time engages with the carnivalesque, particularly in its hierarchical inversions. Much of the subversive power of the play comes from the intensifying spiral of romantic illusion and obsessional desire that characterises the relationship between two teenage girls and their interrelationships with their families and society. A ritualistic, imaginative drive towards the attainment of freedom and happiness is continually offset by an intermittent cool, harsh unveiling of the law and legal facts.

Subversion or disruption of embedded assumptions and codes of normality is this play’s strongest and most overt carnivalesque feature. Positive,
regenerative laughter is not a fundamental constituent of the anti-establishment carnivalesque reversals of this play. Although *Daughters of Heaven* is not based on carnival laughter, as are *Ophelia Thinks Harder* and *Lashings of Whipped Cream*, carnivalesque humour operates effectively in certain scenes, where animal images and derogatory references invoke the human degradation characteristic of carnival laughter. It is particularly striking in Juliet’s and Pauline’s interactions with Bridget, and in their lampooning of the defence lawyer Gresson, who is playfully nicknamed:

JULIET: Hello, Bambi.
GREsson: I’m terribly sorry, Juliet. I feel I’ve failed you.
JULIET: Is it true that wig on your head is made of horsehair?
Gina and I have a bet on it. Is it?
GREsson: Yes. It is.
JULIET, mouthing to PAULINE: I told you so. (p. 79)

This carnival game is distorting and intrusive. Juliet’s lighthearted and irreverent banter comically subverts a tragic real life situation (she and Pauline have just been found guilty of murder and sentenced to prison). When Gresson suggests arranging a meeting with Juliet’s mother, who is terribly upset about the verdict, he is gradually transformed from spectator to participant in the frivolous carnival game:

JULIET: Bambi, you’re going to miss your rugby game in Lancaster Park with all this idle chat...
Have I ever told you how foolish you look in that get up?
GREsson: Many times. I’m worried about you, Juliet. We all are.
JULIET: That’s jolly decent of you. (p. 79)

Despite the lawyer’s reticence to join in, the game with its disruptive codes, unexpected reversals and internally established rules continues:

GREsson: You don’t seem to realise that you need help.
JULIET: You too. I think you’re a very melancholy man.
Why don’t you treat yourself to a holiday?
GREsson: Listen to me. This is no time for schoolgirl games...
You must accept your situation. (p. 79)

Gresson, like the participant of medieval carnival, has become both subject and object of the game. He is thrust, unprepared, into a discourse of distorting carnival camaraderie, abuse and laughter:

JULIET: You botched the case Bambi... You’re an odd fish but
I like you Bambi. I always have. better luck next time. (p. 79)

This humour is not the all encompassing crude humour of medieval carnival. It retains its modern satiric form. Carnival laughter is spasmodic. While it makes a valuable contribution to the construction of a ‘suspended reality’, humour functions as an instrument of temporary release rather than as a major structuring element of the play.

Carnival ambivalence and subversion are pervasive. Ambiguous codes produce dramatic tensions. These help to structure and maintain a paradoxical, private, imaginative world which continually resists oppression and closure. The Fourth World exposes both the characters and the audience to a re-constructed theatrical ‘reality’ with shifting historical, temporal and spatial boundaries. Elements of fun, parody, ritualistic celebration and game-playing characterise the activities and performances of the girls in their expansive, anti-establishment world. Familiar components of medieval folk carnival are sustained even when an unexpected interruption from the ‘outside’ occurs, such as the sudden appearance of Bridget O'Malley:

BRIDGET: I shouldn’t need to be collecting these dirty cups and plates every afternoon. You've both got two good legs to walk on.

JULIET: Bridget approves of our legs!

PAULINE: Ooooh!

BRIDGET: Cut your filthy talk and give me a hand. (p. 37)

In the early scenes of Act One elements of play and subversion have a lighthearted carnivalesque flavour. Religious impieties and social improprieties intersect with romantic notions in contemporary game playing activities, and a language which employs medieval theatrical images and techniques. Hierarchical distortions and comic degradations appear at first to contain a regenerative element, and early expressions of their ‘Fourth World’ reality reflect the release and promise of a festive carnival spirit.

First the girls communicate to each other from their separate prison cells, a setting which frames the play and highlights the paradoxical relationship between various forms of institutionalised confinement and carnival release. The intersection of Pauline’s prayer of contrition with Juliet’s intimate message introduces the audience to the protagonists. Then their fantasy enactments move to the Hulme household (Juliet’s bedroom or the grounds of Ilam).
A craving for excitement, adventure and risk-taking sets the direction of these imaginative games. Their adoption of male identities and the master/servant interplay indicates a basic understanding of hegemonic class structure and power-driven relationships:

**JULIET, holding up a chalice:** To the health and long life of my champion! *(She drinks then gives the chalice to PAULINE).* Craven masses, hear the words of the mighty Diello. He has toppled his ancient father from the throne and vows to rule according to the rule of a new generation. There will be no mercy to those who disobey me. *(p. 20)*

Juliet's obvious delight in adopting a position of male power, with Pauline playing the lowly supplicant, at first masks the underlying paradigm—the intention to put in place, without interference, the law of a new generation. It gradually becomes clear that this phrase is significant and that Juliet speaks for both herself and Pauline as this scene moves on.

Hierarchical inversion, traditionally enacted in the carnival to eliminate or mask divisions between high and low does not achieve its full socially disruptive potential. Pauline desperately tries to break away from her working class roots by inveigling herself into the materialistic bourgeois lifestyle of the Hulmes. Yet Pauline's relationship with Juliet, both privately and in the public perception, is a constant affirmation of the cultural and class divisions existing between these characters.

The girls' carnivalesque reversal of normal everyday roles in their Fourth World imaginative suspension of reality seems to stop at the point where Juliet maintains the superior class position and Pauline sustains a subservient role.

**PAULINE, putting HILDA'S fur stole around JULIET'S shoulders:**
The mantle of greatness descends upon you.
**JULIET:** Viva Borovnia!
**PAULINE, putting a ring on JULIET'S finger:** The Ring of Fortitude. Given to you by Lancelot Trelawny your true and faithful liege man. He will live and die in thy earthly worship.
**JULIET:** Vivat Borovnia! *(p. 20)*
This scene creates an atmosphere of mutual respect, intellectual rapport and sense of collusion between the girls, despite their class differences and an inbuilt power imbalance in the relationship. The ‘oneness’ of the girls’ thinking is captured in the repeated phrase “Vivat Borovnia”. The intensity of their romantic desires, become even more evident when they play out their imaginative ritual to what appears to be its inevitable conclusion:

PAULINE, placing a crown on JULIET’S head: The Crown of Desire. For the weak shall never enter the Kingdom of Love.
JULIET: Vivat Diello! Anoint me.
PAULINE, anointing JULIET with oil and intoning: And as Solomon was anointed by Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet be thou anointed Emperor of Borovnia and Volumnia.
JULIET tilts her face to be kissed on the lips.
BRIDGET O’MALLEY calls out. (p. 20)

As Pauline takes over the dialogue the audience is made aware of the closeness and collusion between the girls. She reacts to the verbal attack with a feigned politeness:

PAULINE: Hello, Mrs O’Malley.
BRIDGET: What in God’s holy name is that stink? I smelled it right down in the kitchen.
PAULINE: It’s incense.
BRIDGET: You’ve been smoking again, haven’t you.
PAULINE: No, Mrs. O’Malley.
BRIDGET: I smell fags underneath that stink.
PAULINE: It’s candles. We’re playing a game. (pp. 20-21)

While juvenile pranks may elicit the empathy of the spectator, the significance of this scene lies in the triadic theatrical relationship it establishes between Juliet, Pauline and Bridget (the enemy). This interaction creates a polarity between this ‘authority’ figure and the audience, whose sympathies are deliberately divided.

Rash judgements, an abrasive manner and lack of sensitivity do not win sympathy for Bridget, yet her genuine concern that the girls’ flaunting of ‘rules’ and disdain for outside authority might be leading to trouble, is a view that cannot be ignored. Bridget is not a voluntary carnival participant. Instead she stands for the establishment. This character reinforces the
repressive systems of law and order against which the girls' rebellious
behaviour and carnivalesque games are directed.

The form of play-acting that shifts the relations and balances of dominance,
loyalty and subservience of the established order, and symbolic games which
overturn hierarchies, are typical of the role-playing reversals and
disruptions of carnival. These characters, like the medieval carnival
participant, create empowering social reversals, and distortions of historical
and cultural constructs from within their own human experience. Their
open disdain for the rigidity of the law, conventional social and religious
mores and family values is an explicit manifestation of carnival celebration
and freedom at this point in the play.

Elaborate ritual, ceremony, and religious allusion incorporate pagan and
Christian influences, thereby forging a tenuous link between the embedded
chivalric traditions of a medieval romantic past and the disruptive elements
of medieval carnival. The subversive capacity of the Fourth World is reliant
upon bringing these traditions, vividly transformed and rearticulated, into a
contemporary present—into a theatrical reality that resists the limits of
closure.

Lancelot, the soldier of fortune, calls upon the power of nature as an
invasive force and a deadly weapon against humanity:

   PAULINE: Fennel, Dock and wandering Jew, take root.
   Convolvulus and periwinkle, flourish through the land.
   Prickly gorse and deadly belladonna, entwine together to
   pierce the hearts of our enemies. Poison, plague and
   pestilence, ready yourselves to strike on command of the
   dreaded Diello.... (p. 19)

This focus on the destructive elements of nature directs us towards another
of the play's carnivalesque elements and hints at the existence of a sub-text
in the performance script. The audience is unaware at this point of a
carefully placed clue that is to connect this elaborate ritual with the play's
other secret rituals and romantic scenarios, planned and carried out by the
girls as the play progresses.

The subjective, multiple positioning of the girls, both within their close
relationship, and in their interactions with other characters in the play, is
Class perceptions permeate the text of *Daughters of Heaven*. They influence characters’ behaviour, dress, language, attitudes to life and their freedom to move socially, emotionally, intellectually or imaginatively.

Characters respond differently to being locked into a system that restricts movement. Both the rigid unchallenged acceptance of this, and the pressing need to change things or search for a way out, create dramatic tensions throughout the play. These tensions develop between the characters, their inner and outer worlds and the social systems that imprison them. Bridget and Henry Hulme display their vulnerability to the different kinds of prisons imposed on each of them. Bridget’s pertinent observation that she cannot understand a word Henry Hulme utters because “he is Cambridge educated” is certainly not without basis:

**HENRY:** Mrs. O’Malley. It appears I shall be unavoidably incarcerated in the Ivory Tower past dinner time. (p. 18)

The audience is introduced to Juliet’s parents in a condensed scene which exaggerates their distinguishing traits and marks them out as key characters in the complex scenario which is yet to be played out. This introduction also opens up to the audience the atmosphere of formality and artificiality that pervades the Hulme mansion—the site where many of Juliet and Pauline’s subversive Fourth World escapades and rituals are played out. Bridget manages however to have the last word, and laugh. Her apparently mild acceptance of Henry’s gentlemanly qualities, slides quickly into a comic carnivalesque mode. He was not, she tells the audience: “like some of those other university types buggering each other behind closed doors calling it research. He wasn’t like that . . . .” (p. 18).

It is evident that this is a play textured with ambiguity at many levels, and designed to open up questions, rather than to close off possible avenues of creative activity by providing solutions or acceptable answers.

Like the participants of Bakhtin’s carnival, Juliet and Pauline are constantly trying to break free from a restrictive system of gender, class and ethical values. However, the anti-establishment reversals and subversions of their Fourth World do not always collapse social and cultural boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable, the real and the unreal, the high and the low.
A strong and lingering allegiance to England comes through in Hilda's fervent determination (after the tragedy) that Juliet will change her name by deed poll and move into a new future there. Juliet's cynical view of her mother's 'solution' calls into question any possible maternal motives:

JULIET: Starting over is her theme song as if all I am now must be erased. The girl without a past. I'm to change my name by deed poll, devise a fictitious history and step, newly minted, onto England's happy shore. (p. 83)

For Juliet's mother New Zealand represents a backward, dull colony where everything has gone stupidly wrong. If blame is to be allocated, Hilda believes it should be at the door of this country and of Pauline Parker.

Juliet's language indicates her class and awareness of religious groups. Although she soon learns to use prison jargon: "some screw told me you've become a Catholic" Juliet spontaneously uses the language of the better educated and the articulate: "It would indicate a serious character defect on your part" (p. 83). Formal rhetoric seems to be a natural expression of privilege and freedom "As the prophets foretold, the doors of the Fourth World shall open for us and we shall join their exalted ranks" (p. 68). Juliet is articulate as she assesses her position and that of Pauline, aware that she has a higher place in society than her friend. This comes across in play-making, conversation and general attitudes.

Her higher place in society enables her to aspire uninhibitedly. She wants "to climb to the top of a hill and embrace the sky. Not just a mingy bit of sky, but all of it, unfettered and stretching to eternity" (p. 84). As she contemplates the future for them both, her stance is always superior to that of Pauline. Class is relevant at all times whether Juliet is aware of that fact or not. Pauline in all their play together is willingly subservient.

Mrs. Hulme's language also indicates her social position. She invites Bridget to leave her service as she needs the flat, but Bridget insists that "she didn’t have any qualms about ditching me . . . she wanted the flat for purposes of fornication, pure and simple" (p. 44). Bridget's words demonstrate her rote learning of her Catholic beliefs in sin while Hilda Hulme's reflect her obsession with protocol and appearances. Bridget's honesty and directness collide with Mrs. Hulme's veneer of respectability. Hilda masks her real
reason for giving Mr. Perry the flat with superficial conversation “it’s most uncomfortable for him to be living semi-permanently in a hotel room” (p. 44).

Juliet dominates Pauline not just in social position but in her ability to imagine, devise and articulate their novel activities. Bridget asks why the pair were in their knickers, thrashing about in the ferns muttering mumbo jumbo. Juliet calmly replies that they were burying religion. They were performing a ritual. Bridget’s warns “You’re making yourself an easy target for the Devil” (p. 22). Her words are a clear statement of the rigid stance she takes in relation to religion and society.

The inverted world in which the two girls mutually strive to attain an eternal “oneness” is demonstrated vividly in the intimate interwoven dialogue that alternates between Juliet and Pauline when each is cut off from the other physically, but speaks out from the privacy of her own bedroom or separate prison cell:

PAULINE: Suddenly the means of ridding myself of the obstacle occurs to me.
JULIET: ... I see the faint shadow of a solution ... the faintest of shadows, there on the horizon.
PAULINE: I will not tell Deborah of my plans—yet.
JULIET: I will not say anything to Gina—yet. She must come to see the inevitability herself. (p. 30)

The prison cell dialogues, on the other hand, become a desperate vocal plea for survival after things have gone horribly wrong. The girls continue to invoke the rituals and fantasies of carnival when they are first imprisoned together. Their game-playing continues then to be a powerful means of closing out reality. While they fantasise extravagantly about what they’ll wear: “straitjackets by Dior”(p. 53), and openly discuss what prison they would like to end up in, there is an implicit assumption that they will still be together:

PAULINE: If you could choose any prison which one would it be?
JULIET: Mt. Eden sounds rather fascinating. Pseudo-medieval. We could write the second installment of the Adventures of Lancelot Trelawny there. (p. 72)
Soon this lighthearted fantasy world overflows into a harsh reality that the
girls are unwilling to accept. In the following urgent, resistive utterances
permanent separation looms as a destructive force and the fragility of
carnival suspension is revealed.

When no longer operating merely as the “residual of a cosmogony” the
carnival game becomes dangerous. The leading players, Juliet and Pauline,
do not remain participants in a harmless carnival celebration that
temporarily subverts dominant ideologies. Their agenda for disruption is
more drastic and permanent. Clear distinctions drawn early in the play
between routine everyday activities and the pleasurable suspensions of the
separate Fourth World soon fade, as a competing cosmogony is methodically
introduced. Carnival transgression breaks the bounds of its own modality
when its main participants do not just subvert the strictures of the
establishment, but totally dismiss them and (through both design and
intent) develop their own rules for ordering and explaining the world.

Temporary carnival suspensions are palpably transformed, through the
artificial sphere of the Fourth world and its external encroachments, into an
indomitable and stark reality:

PAULINE: Our main idea for the day was to moider Mother.
This notion is not a new one but this time it is a definite
plan which we intend to carry out. We have looked at it
carefully and are both thrilled with the idea. Naturally
we feel a trifle nervous, but the pleasure of anticipation
is great.
JULIET: Gina is very excited, as am I. At last we begin to
move towards the final culmination of our dreams.
Our consciences are clear. Great love requires great
sacrifice. (p. 50)

As the girls transfer their carnivalesque diversions to a practical resolution
of their ‘plan-of- action’, play-acting and the release of carnival laughter are
distorted to the point where all positive, fun-filled carnivalesque
associations of the medieval grotesque dissipate:

JULIET: It’s like a film isn’t it?

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8 Julia Kristeva argues that “the residual offers no methodology. Its epistemology operates
under a different modality. This modality initially appears to be indecipherable but remains
so only under the stricture of the cosmogony.” Quoted by P. Furey in “Carnivalesque Characters
and Aphanisis in the Modernist Novel”, p. 76. See footnote 3 above for publication details.
PAULINE: Universal Studios presents—

JULIET: Moidering Mother! They try to stifle their laughter.

PAULINE: Shhh!

JULIET: I think I’m hysterical.

PAULINE: Calm down, Darling. We have to concentrate.

(pp. 56-57)

Cloying elements of carnival, mask and masquerade linger. This performance is private and exclusive although the preliminary scene is set up in a public arena (the tea kiosk of Victoria park, Christchurch, where the girls have taken Pauline’s mother on the pretext of enjoying a lovely afternoon’s outing). The stage setting of the present action (the bridge at the bottom of an isolated walking track) is furnished with all the appropriate, pre-selected actors, decor and props:

MRS. RIEPER and PAULINE begin walking towards the bridge. JULIET is beyond it, hiding.

PAULINE: Look, Mother. What is that?
MRS. RIEPER: What?
PAULINE: On the ground. Something pink.

MRS. RIEPER bends down. PAULINE takes the brick out of her shoulder bag.

MRS. RIEPER: It’s some kind of stone. It looks like a bit of a necklace . . .

PAULINE silently raises the brick.

Maybe it’s part of a charm bracelet . . .

PAULINE strikes her mother. JULIET comes running to assist her. The Fourth World envelops them. (p. 57)

The reversals and subversions of the imaginative Fourth World spill over compulsively and finally into the public sphere through the act of premeditated murder. Here carnival transgression loses its temporary character of light-hearted resistance to establishment rules and hierarchies, and the spectacle loses its freeing, regenerative, celebratory flavour. Paradoxically the ultimately subversive act of murder encompasses the repressiveness of rigid closure that the releasing carnivalesque constructions and images of the Fourth World were created to counteract. In this world though, death does not generate new life. Honora Reiper’s excessively violent, shocking murder is an absolute anti-establishment act of disruption and closure.
Forster's play world shows that murder ultimately obliterates the possibility of carnival freedom and release. Death does not hold the promise of new life. Instead, the destructive taking away of another's right to live leads to a reinforcement of the dominant and repressive power structures of justice and the law. Murder brings with it an inbuilt demand for retribution, punishment and further closure, in the form of imprisonment. Even more significantly, this excessively subversive and grotesque social act removes the action from the lightedhearted, earthy familiarity and ambivalent laughter of the medieval marketplace. Heteroglossia is replaced by prurience, verbal abuse and gossip of a different kind:

BRIDGET: This is how I found out. I was doing the potatoes when my neighbour told me there'd been an accident in Victoria Park. I wasn't much interested—some kiddie falling off a swing, I thought. Then she whispers, 'The Hulme girl and her little friend ran into the tea kiosk covered with blood. I thought you'd want to know.' Was I surprised? No. But even so, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and began marching. (p. 59)

The dynamics of the play depend upon a network of power relations, complex layers of meaning and linking dramatic devices, rather than on a linear unfolding of plot or single narrative voice. Bridget fulfills the dramatic function of entertaining the audience and produces some vital information. Yet before we can evaluate it and form a response we need to know more—from the only available source source. The playwright's awareness of this leads to an immediate switch of setting and focus.

The stage space has become a courtroom. As the Crown Prosecutor Alan Brown addresses the jury he reveals 'the true nature of the crime'. The words uttered by this character, although related to an imaginary jury on stage, are aimed also at the theatre audience:

BROWN: Most of you will have read in the newspapers, and no doubt have discussed among your friends, the story of the crime. One of my duties is to ask you to endeavour to forget all you have read or heard about the case, and indeed it is your duty to do so. You are here to decide the case on the evidence and on the evidence alone. (pp. 18-19)

Brown's warning to the jury is more than a mere directive when he dutifully suggests that even if they feel pity for the dead woman, "the
mother of the girl Parker who was brutally done to death", or for the accused "in the dreadful situation they find themselves in today" (p. 19), they must not let this affect their judgements within the judicial system. Brown’s idealistic comment that “Sentiment and emotionalism have no part in British justice” (p. 19), masks the reality of the social context in which the trial is taking place, and reveals something of the personal views of this narrator/character. At the same time it fulfills a useful dramatic purpose as it implicitly draws attention to the complexity of the issues and events that are to come, and hints ironically at the overwhelming tide of prejudice and misunderstanding that the young girls’ close friendship invokes.

During Brown’s attempt to narrate an unbiased, factual account of the girls’ meeting and the rapid development of a friendship and events which lead to the killing of Pauline’s mother, Bridget’s irreverent asides have an unsettling effect. As the jury is receiving clear instructions for their deliberations from the crown prosecutor these are undermined by comments such as:

BRIDGET: British justice. Hah! There isn’t a person in this courtroom—or in the whole of Christchurch—who isn’t salivating over every detail.” (p.19)

Brown’s reference to the girls’ intense devotion to each other after meeting at Christchurch Girls’ High School two years previously brings this response from Bridget, moving her from distant observer to one whose knowledge of the teenagers’ activities is more intimate:

BRIDGET: Aye, the girls were devoted, I’ll give you that. Pauline was devoted to Juliet and Juliet was devoted to herself. (p. 19)

In Daughters of Heaven carnival operates at a paradoxical level that both challenges and gives some credence to Foucault’s dictum that “desire and institution must combine to give sense to utterance”. 9

As Bridget describes the official ‘chaos’ of the courtroom dialogues a strong sense of the contradictory stances and heteroglossia of Bakhtin’s carnival emerges:

9 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, p. 106.
BRIDGET: By now the courtroom was swimming with contradictions and useless talk. Dr. Medlicott insisted Pauline and Juliet were certifiable and the Crown doctors said just the opposite. He said, she said, he said—on and on it went... and were we any closer to the truth? Not in my book. (p. 75)

Bridget's pivotal role as self-appointed upholder of law and order for the 'common people' polarises viewpoints. Her engagement with the gossip of carnival deflects controversial issues away from the repression and rigidity of her own views and from the strictures of the establishment. She constantly engages the audience in the polyphony and organised chaos of the local marketplace.

Does creating one's own religion, believing they were gods, or outstanding geniuses setting out to break all the Ten Commandments, committing blackmail, theft, cheating and murder mean that these adolescent girls are brutal criminals or, in common language, “crackers”?10 Bridget’s input, unlike the participants of the formal courtroom drama, is not a distant, superficial reflection of high philosophical, medical or legal debate, but an expression of carnival denigration and abuse:

BRIDGET: I looked into their faces—Pauline and Juliet—and I saw them as they were. Two precocious dirty-minded little girls... Two pathetic girls with grand ideas of something more... (p. 78)

There is no redemptive factor in this judgement. Bridget's smug perception strips carnival degradation of its inherent power of renewal. Hierarchical reversal no longer holds the carnivalesque promise of happiness or release. For the first time during the action of the play Juliet and Pauline are silenced. As the sentence is passed and the girls are led away, the Fourth World, with its profound drive towards subversion and liberation, is ultimately unable to offer freedom. Carnival liberation is attained only in the suspended sphere of authorised transgression. Carnival transgression cannot save Pauline and Juliet from that final, unwanted reversal of imprisonment and permanent separation. The official, public consequences of their transgression are totally alien to the all-encompassing, transient

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10 Gresson uses this term in his courtroom defence of the girls which is based on a plea of insanity (DOH, p. 78).
freedoms and pleasures of the carnival world, yet their private Fourth World existence is not.

The ongoing resistance, lack of closure and ‘other world’ operations that form the basis of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival are partially defeated when external realities are unexpectedly distorted and undermined from inside the Fourth World. In this play world “an unexpected and unauthorised carnivalisation suddenly occurs in ‘real’ everyday life.” The murder of Honora Rieper moves the theatrical discourse beyond the realm of postmodern and carnivalesque subversion. This performance text, while reinventing events and circumstances surrounding a violent transgression of the law, presents a stage world (separated from the carnivalesque imaginative Fourth World) with an element of the grotesque that is no longer recognisable as ‘carnival excess’ or ‘postmodern superfluity’. Murder, in any context, is irreversibly destructive; it is a violent closing off of life without the promise of renewal; the only form of promise it offers is retribution; not only does murder violate ‘the rule’ but it officially reinstates it:

ADAMS: The sentence of the court is detention during her majesty’s pleasure. The prisoners may now be removed. (p. 78)

The shock-waves that sweep though a previously undisturbed, smug, puritanical community unearth a battery of rigidly held prejudices, repressive enforcements and ambiguous interpretations of the law and produce a strong sense of loss. Daughters of Heaven theatrically reconstructs historical and social elements that are totally alien to the territory and spirit of Bakhtin’s Carnival. This negativity has the potential to destroy the empowering physical and spiritual freedoms of the Fourth World discourse.

The individuality of the spiritual ‘elite’ and the communal unity of the “craven masses” are camouflaged by an ambivalent theatrical discourse that simultaneously reinforces and resists embedded traditions and systems of the established order. The paradox of the courtroom drama is that it retains the inherent ambivalence and reversal of carnival, as well as its external trappings. The formalised setting, language and costumes—black

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12 Juliet uses these words, when she is playing ‘king’ to Pauline as her lowly ‘subject’ in one of the girls’ earlier, more innocent, carnivalesque games (DOH, p. 20).
gowns and horse-hair wigs—contribute to the carnivalesque perception of a world operating within its own sphere under its own internal system of rules:

**BROWN:** Did these two young persons, when they attacked Mrs Reiper, know what they were doing? . . .  
**BROWN:** Did they know they were wrong according to the law?  
**MEDLICOTT:** They did, but they did not recognise the law. (p. 77)

Mask, masquerade and play-acting constantly blur the boundaries between appearance and reality as the imaginative distortions of a Fourth World existence, operating in a dimension suspended from everyday reality, continue. Bridget is one character who does not participate in the ‘other world’ dimension of ambivalent meaning or suspended reality:

**BRIDGET:** But the law is the law. Like God is God. You can’t remake the universe to suit yourself. The universe is, and you fit into it. Isn’t that so? When Mr. Gresson summed up he tried to tell us ordinary folk we weren’t fit to judge these matters. (p. 77)

These matter-of-fact utterances may not reflect the lighthearted essence of a free carnival spirit, yet they continue to amuse, to evoke the polyphony of the medieval marketplace, and establish the right of the common people to judge and to speak. Bridget’s pivotal role as self-appointed upholder of law and order for the ‘common people’ continues to polarise viewpoints. A capacity for ‘helpful’ interference confirms this character’s function as God’s avenging angel. A complex scenario in which she acts as spiritual ‘saviour’ to the girls, encourages a diversity of audience responses. It splits common opinion of the day (represented by Bridget) between the opposing poles of allegiance to conventional Christian values, law and order, and a humane sympathy for two vulnerable teenage girls who proved to be capable of matricide. The ‘lies’ Bridget tells both Juliet and Pauline to enforce her plan to keep them apart calls attention to the dangerous inflexibility of her religious views and throws doubt on the validity of a restrictive moral law. Everyday humane values are distorted by the destructive power of hypocrisy. The subversive theatrical strategy of this scene creates the same sort of ambivalent effects offstage as those emerging in the onstage action. A powerful policy of ‘divide and conquer’ seems to rule the theatrical space.

**PAULINE:** Are you telling me the truth?  
**BRIDGET:** Yes. It’s God’s truth, Pauline, God’s truth. (p. 86)
“The key to eternal life and truth everlasting” (p. 68) has been both promised (by the Fourth World), and denied (by Bridget), in a final, inexplicably perverse, subversive act.

The carnivalesque transgressions and ambivalences of Daughters of Heaven cannot be totally contained within the slippery boundaries of a Fourth World reality, although this is where they reach their most spectacular manifestation. Ultimately, in this play, death defeats carnival frivolity, laughter, and the promise of re-birth. The violent act of murder both contaminates the ‘licensed’ freedom of the fearless, carefree carnival spirit, and destroys its power of regeneration.

Juliet and Pauline made a fatal mistake. Not only did they believe they had the power to control their own lives and destinies through their imaginative play, they placed themselves above the law 13, and tried to manipulate reality itself:

MEDLICOTT: So the ‘Fourth World’ that you speak of is a real physical place?
JULIET: We saw it at Port Levy. It’s metaphorical in the sense that it’s not exact but it’s definitely there.
MEDLICOTT: Couldn’t this world be part of your imagination?
JULIET: I know it’s real. (pp. 67-68).

The explosion of this imaginatively constructed ‘reality’ into the already artificial ‘reality’ of everyday life of the play kills Honora Reiper, but it also kills the essence of carnival.

Despite the negative consequences and destructive force of a potentially liberating Fourth World existence that becomes obsessively out of control, some positive elements remain. Significant traces of the earlier powerful game-playing tactics and performance attributes of carnival appear in the courtroom deliberations and scenes portraying the aftermath of the murder.

Early in the play the carnivalesque exhibits its powerful game-playing and performance attributes. Mask, disguise, and play-acting contribute to the distortions and ambivalences of a Fourth World reality that operates in a

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13 After the murder Juliet speaks for Pauline when she insists that she doesn’t believe they have done anything wrong: “I know we’ve broken the law, but morally we are without fault” (DOH, p. 67).
dimension divorced from everyday. For a long while it retains its essence of celebratory, resistive activity against the oppressive closures of the external world of established law and order. The inhabitants of the Fourth World aspire towards a renewal and release with the regenerative capacity of carnival. But this changes after the ‘suspended time life’ of carnival explodes, uncharacteristically, into the everyday temporal world. The paradoxical structure of the imaginative Fourth World is signalled by its collapse into a tangible everyday reality, where the compulsion for freedom and resistance invites violence, imprisonment and closure. For a short time, when it pretends, like carnival, to lead its participants beyond their own limits, the ambiguous Fourth World regains its positive carnivalesque quality of celebratory resistance and promise:

JULIET: I want you to remember Paradise. It was ours once.
We created our own map of Heaven. Now that I have been brought to my knees I see our star brighter than ever.
I will never give in.
PAULINE: I will never look back.
JULIET: I will never regret.
PAULINE: It is our fate. (p. 86)

In Daughters of Heaven the carnivalesque is a separate but intrusive theatrical discourse, driven by the desperation of the protagonists and ultimately contaminated by “fate”.

In the theatrical reconstruction of the murder and its aftermath, carnival subversions do not merely distort or disrupt existing oppressive codes but temporarily abandon them. Officialdom substitutes others fixed codes which pollute the festive spirit of carnival and destroy its regenerative capacity. When the dominant discourse rules, it ensures that the freedoms and releases typical of carnival are sought, but not attained.

The play constructs a Fourth World reality in which the upside-down world of carnival subversion and resistance becomes the norm. Unlike the world of Bakhtin’s carnival the Fourth World does not remain a separate sphere. The Fourth World turns the carnivalesque challenge of the rule, or superficial overturning of officialdom, into a vicious attack on the underlying fabric of society. Carnival subversion leads its participants towards an impossible freedom.
All the way through the play Juliet and Pauline have considered themselves above the law. Where set social or moral boundaries constricted them they ignored them and made up their own rules specially tailored to the situation as they saw it. Whether in their fantasy play, or in the more serious undertaking of systematically setting out to break all Ten Commandments, the girls' disdain of the voice of law and order (epitomised in the characters of Mrs. Reiper and Bridget) has been foregrounded. When the restrictive barriers are non collapsible and inflexible they are considered as 'obstacles' to be forcibly removed. Honora Reiper was such an obstacle. The intricate scheme to 'moider mother', set out in detail in the girls' diaries, was conceived and carried out with this alarming motivation:

**JULIET:** We have the right to do whatever we needed to do in the interests of our own happiness. (p. 68)

A clear betrayal of carnival comaraderie and freedom is apparent however when the girls contrive to keep their special sphere apart from outside interference by denying all 'outsiders' entry into their elite Fourth World existence.

The suspended reality and appealing intensity of the carnival spirit is dissipated when ambiguous codes of promise of renewal are replaced with an ominous, destructive and, ultimately suffocating, hidden agenda. The dramatic scenario that evolves from the diary entries in which the plan to "moider mother" is formulated it carries with it an implacability and destructive potential that is totally alien to the positive, anti-establishment impetus of Bakhtin's carnival.

The carnivalesque is a dominant yet fluctuating force in this play. A diversity of carnivalesque images and utterances, adds to the sense of dissemination and contradiction brought about by the postmodern structure and multi-tiered levels of reality. The open-ended textual construction allows a complex network of continually circulating and competing perspectives to emerge.

Subversive carnival and postmodern strategies heighten the paradoxical theatrical structures of the play, and contribute to the powerful ambiguities generated by social and theatrical codes. However, manifestations of carnival liberation and excess are bizarrely self-defeating in *Daughters of Heaven,*
when carnival transgression and the grotesque become the norm. When murder masquerades as an *authorised* act of anti-establishment subversion this is not merely a stance taken against 'established authority', it is a stance against the spirit of carnival itself.

This play creates an 'anti-carnival' carnival of *extremes*. Transgression progresses to violent death; ritual 'play' becomes a deadly game; grotesque images invade the world of everyday existence; upset hierarchies are firmly re-established and rigid laws forcibly imposed.

The liberating fantasies of the Fourth World, with their carnivalesque drive towards unity and 'future happiness', lead to closure, separation and loss. In the world of Forster's play carnivalesque inversions lose their symbolic, regenerative power, and the chance for its carnival participants to escape the oppressions of officialdom with a sense of celebration, release and subversion that holds no fear of reprisal, is tragically forfeited.

Throughout the play the audience has been situated ambivalently. Thrust into a stage reality which incorporates conflicting public opinion and personal viewpoints of the time, the theatre spectator has been forced to consider the weight of the 'evidence' provided by both narrators, and simultaneously (without prejudgement) to form their own ethical and social judgements.

Undoubtedly *Daughters of Heaven* creates a carnivalesque discourse. Its protagonists Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker enter wholeheartedly into the ritual and spirit of carnival; they engage in carnival laughter and subvert everyday norms through their imaginative play-acting games. Their symbolic rituals create the sense of a separate sphere, an unofficial world of spectacle, abandon and release from the oppressive rigidity of rules. In their carnivalesque games Juliet and Pauline appropriate "the natural theater of carnival in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the masters." ¹⁴

Juliet and Pauline, through their Fourth World existence, consistently recreate an upside-down, ambiguous 'reality' which captures the essence of carnival; as carnival participants they are both actors and spectators; they are

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¹⁴ Eco, "The frames of 'comic freedom' ", p. 3.
“subjects of the spectacle and objects of the game.” 15 Juliet is dedicated to ‘re-making’ the world to suit her personal whims and desires, and encourages Pauline to do the same. These imaginative aspirations and ambitions create a paradox: while their romantic yearnings and dreams are typical of the friendships of many teenagers, the scale, scope and social consequences of their extreme actions separate them from their peers by a huge margin.

In Daughters of Heaven Juliet and Pauline play subversive games, dress in motley garb, wear grotesque masks, perform fantasy rituals and carry out the ultimate anti-establishment act. But if this is carnival, it is a cold carnival—and far removed from Bakhtin’s warm carnival laughter.

15 Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 78.
CONCLUSION

Subversive Acts

Performance occurs in a middle region between the world of transparency and the world of opacity.

—Herbert Blau 1

The carnival sphere, operating in a zone between the world of transparency and the world of opacity, produces spectacle and ritual, not just out of a fleeting or vivid ‘appearance’ but out of ‘lived’ experience; it creates sites of contestation, exchange and re-production that replicate the dynamic negotiations and exchanges of theatrical performance.

According to Herbert Blau there is an ideal vision, such as Rousseau’s, of a fête or carnival in which all the obscurities cease and all of us are, because outside the realm of exchange and reproduction, no more than we appear to be, and no less. He sees that world as: “the wine harvest of La Nouvelle Héloïse, the unperformed claritas of the open air, rustic and convivial, without boundaries, classless (or with all classes participating), a unison of recipricocity and shared being such as utopias have imagined and probably no culture, even the most rustic and convivial, has ever approached. It is a mise en scène without a gaze, everything seen and nothing to show”. 2

My explorations of Bakhtin’s carnival have uncovered a potential for resistance, a classlessness, a boundless conviviality, and an energy which is neither ideal nor empty of significance. The positive, timeless, endlessly

1 Herbert Blau, Take Up the Bodies: Theatre at the Vanishing Point, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
circulating drives of Bakhtin’s carnival open up an area of recipricocity and participation that is non-differential and non-exclusive.

Important connections between carnival spectacle and postmodern theatre have been revealed through an exploration of texts from the perspective of performance. In performance ostensible stage ‘realities’ are created through a process of artistic collaboration, and theatrical subjects are positioned according to a variety of overt codes of appearance, speech and behaviour. The stage world constitutes a complex system of shifting power relations and effects through which the subject is split, multiplied or reconstructed into a ‘performing identity’.

Blau’s views on spectacle and performance appear at first to be negative, limiting and antithetical, in relation to the challenging, subversive approach to performance adopted in the works of the New Zealand artists explored here. He does however touch on certain fundamental “Universals of Performance” that are illuminating. The theoretical observation that appearance dominates the idea of performance can be extended to theatrical practice, where appearance is indeed a dominant factor in the complex system of codes which creates meaning in a stage performance. Postulations of a theory of performance, such Blau’s, take on more valuable associations when projected into the practical study of theatre and performance texts. His claim that an approximation of a spectacle-without-looking may take place in ceremonies or rituals where the spectator and spectacle presumably merge, points to a key process in both carnival and postmodern theatre practice—the shifting relations between subject and signifier.

My analyses in this study show that putting a subject in process on stage and reading the codes of theatrical performance, can be complicated tasks when the subject is deliberately decentered or destabilised, as it is in postmodern and carnival performance. For Blau performance involves:

... trying to determine the absence of a seeming in what only seems to be there ... wavering in the pathos of his own invisibility.  

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3 Blau cites “an aboriginal ceremony” and a “high ritual process like a Mass” as approximations of a spectacle-without-looking.
4 Blau, p. 7.
This is an insight which I find applicable to both the spectator, and the makers of the theatre spectacle. Literary works with the potential to be performed, are inherently incoherent until they make the practical transition from page to stage. In practice, that is, in a theatrical performance, all objects, images and verbal elements are textually transformed into a communal theatre language of dynamic signs. The complicated artistic processes of play scripting, production and performance ultimately bring actors and audience together in a self-contained but expansive world, where a complex set of signs structure meaning, and operate on different levels of reality.

The ‘re-created’ world of stage performance allows new kinds of realities to evolve. Theatre performance, institutionally and artistically separated from its sociological context, puts a different emphasis on “the initial layer of perceptible reality” that we all experience daily through the language of signs. Here it becomes a dominating and controlling force. The context of theatre performance transforms this surface layer so that it becomes the reality by which all competing perceptions and realities are measured and judged. A potent perceptual challenge is illustrated in the dynamic interplay of power relations created by a theatrical performance, which depends for its very existence on signifiers, a language, and a stage reality that operate, visually and aurally, at the superficial level of appearances.

In conventional theatre performance a play’s dynamic hinges on collaborative artistic processes between playwright, director, actors and audience. The development of a play from page to stage occurs through a complex network of creative interactions involving the various theatre practitioners who undertake the cooperative task of creating a stage performance. When operating outside this structure theatre performance creates often unrecognisable but exciting new forms, strategies, and an endless array of ambiguous signifiers. These texts are designed to open up controversial sites of interaction, and involve innovative artistic experimentation and complex stage/audience transactions. Each of the plays explored in this study shows a significant disruptive potential and produces provocative effects; as well, each play text experiments in an innovative way with subversive, postmodern, or carnivalesque theatrical structures or codes.

*Ophelia Thinks Harder, Lashings of Whipped Cream, and Daughters of Heaven,* are theatrical works through which hierarchical structures of all
kinds have been challenged, rearticulated or toppled. The intersecting of a variety of theatrical discourses and representational practices collapses the boundaries between text and performance, past and present. Each of the playwrights shows a willingness to engage with the complex relations of text and language to performance and space in the theatre. These relationships and the intertextual resonances discerned in the plays, reflect a concrete theatrical knowledge and historical consciousness of past and current experimental theatre work.

During the course of this study it has become clear that feminist concerns and patriarchal subversions are addressed in the selected plays in a variety of refreshing ways. Contentious issues have masqueraded within a network of broader concerns and interrogations to do with the ambivalences and complexities of theatre performance itself.

Manifestations of disruptive carnival laughter, spectacle, and destabilising postmodern theatrical codes have raised penetrating questions concerning the 'reality' of appearances. These plays indicate that content does not dominate over form and show a diversity of innovative and artistic approaches to the construction, positioning and reception of the female subject on stage. The juxtapositioning or interweaving of postmodern, feminist and carnivalesque strategies or forms in these plays by Forster, Samuel and Betts, mark a notable development in New Zealand contemporary theatre performance and production.

In each of the selected plays the female subject dominates but stage identities and realities differ in source, construction, function and stability. The plays are connected throughout this analysis by their open-ended styles, transgressive theatrical forms, and subversive performance techniques. The heightening of elements and structures that are intrinsic to all forms of dramatic presentation, but not always so overtly displayed, moves each of these distinctively styled theatrical worlds beyond the realm of rigid conventional representation and expectation, into the ambivalent and fragmented terrain of a postmodern consciousness, or carnival reality.

The selected works construct a discursive theatrical space which is, at once, a site of anarchy, growth, fluctuation and resistance. These stage worlds provide scope for a host of fascinating dynamic interactions between a variety of
converging, diverging or merging stage realities. Peta Tait posits a theatre of mergence which connects its participants in a finite moment of “theatrical sublime”:

In the place of an actor-audience relationship that is predicated on clearly marked boundaries and traditional notions of male desire, I posit a theatre of mergence, leaking boundaries and the sublime. In all my work I search for a sublime moment when audiences and performers feel total empathy; a fantastic, imaginary instance when we merge . . . I find a theatrical sublime that can capture a finite moment of connection, within the social context, quite thrilling. 5

Instances of converging realities within the dynamic of theatrical performance, with a particular focus on stage-audience transactions and operations, occur in the three selected plays. Performance strategies, theatrical techniques and semiotic codes, examined from the perspective of theatre dynamics, show theatrical power structures being set up, elaborated or broken down. Concerned with ambivalences of judgement, signification, and the testing and stretching of theatrical boundaries, the plays demonstrate how theatrical time and space can be manipulated to disrupt or enhance expectations in stage/audience transactions and relationships.

Though contextualised and articulated in very different ways, the plays by Betts, Samuel, and Forster draw attention to gender and hierarchical imbalances and the conflicts arising from these. Using subversive techniques, they overturn or destabilise embedded cultural conventions and disrupt fixed assumptions about the theatrical, social or gendered body. These theatrical works construct characters who demonstrate how the body, especially the woman’s body, usually appropriated by popular culture for its commerce and abuse, may be momentarily reclaimed for pleasure, for provocation, and for entertainment.

The three plays discussed share several common themes and devices. All share cross-dressing and gendered power relations as key themes and are fertile sites for the interplay of fantasy, ritual and the imagination.

Ophelia Thinks Harder fulfills its initial promise as a comic pastiche. Carnivalesque symbols are carefully interwoven through a matrix of intertextual elements and colourful theatrical dis-plays. This play, like its many plays-within-a-play, is performed by a colourful cast of quest[i]on[i]ing characters, who seem to have been thrown, unprepared, into a chaotic world of motley dress and role reversal. In this strangely familiar, ambivalent, stage-world costume, mask, masquerade, comic spectacle, gender reversal, and carnivalesque codes have a primary focus. Bakhtin’s spirit of carnival and grotesque Rabelaisian images add symbolic power and spectacle to the already innovative/postmodern project undertaken by Betts, which was to show Shakespeare’s Hamlet in an intriguingly new light.

Lashings of Whipped Cream is partly a theatrical illumination of how important dress, personal presentation and body language are to earning a successful living. The dominatrix demonstrates in a variety of amusing ways, that dressing right for the job, playing a variety of roles, using appropriate stage settings and properties, are fundamental sustaining elements, of the sex industry, or the acting profession. The play’s dialogic discourse, grotesque imagery, and its utilisation of the postmodern performance art: medium to enhance the comic interplay between stage and audience, situates its protagonist with the spectator, as festive carnival participants. Dominant discourses are turned upside down, rules are made so they can be subverted, and the ‘high’ merges with the ‘low’ in a reclamation of the marginalised or obscene body for popular culture, as powerful site of contestation, sexual desire and empowerment.

Daughters of Heaven is postmodern in its multitextured layering of theatrical perspectives, subject positions and approaches. On one level, it is a classic, dramatic exposition of class privilege, power conflict and rebellion, showing the influence of authority, dress and social expectations on behaviour and the imagination. From another perspective, it engages with a carnival reality whenever the symbolic Fourth World existence of the protagonists becomes the dominant discourse. Although this play introduces a destructive and violent element to the notion of carnival transgression, it articulates many of the traditional and subversive features outlined by Bakhtin. The life-giving, essence of carnival, generated by the protagonists’ role-playing, subversive
Linked to carnival spectacle and theatrical codes is the activity of dressing, undressing or dressing-up to create or re-create an identity or disguise. Costume is an external marker of occupation, gender and class, which positions subjects in specific ways as they interact in the dynamics of live performance. Moving beyond its denotative significance, clothing or the act of 'dressing' creates its own symbolic language, and so is deeply embedded in the network of power structures and textual processes which construct meaning in the theatre. Surface significance is held in what apparel is worn, how it is worn, who wears it and why, how the subject relates to his/her own or another's state of dress, how the stage is dressed. The importance placed on accessories and props as signifiers of a 'stage presence' or 'theatrical reality' is twofold: these overt markers can act also as valuable symbolic indicators of inner character, or particular states of mind, emotions and beliefs. As Lemoine-Luccioni suggests:

Clothing draws the body so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it as a meaningful form. 8

The ultimate power of this 'language of dress' lies in its ability to bring active elements of theatre dynamics into play; it provides a site of negotiation for audience-performance interactions, where boundaries are set, challenged and often blurred. The capacity of dress to illuminate identities, reveal secrets, expose private experiences to public scrutiny, to transform personal perceptions, or to elicit pleasure, is matched by its capacity to create or unmask ambiguities, contradictions, uneasiness or discomfort. In theatre, dress is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power; it sets the scene for the operation of small units of authority at the same time as it functions as a

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6 During the early scenes of the play Juliet and Pauline were totally preoccupied by their imaginative games; they created new identities for themselves, played out their exotic fantasies, and dressed up in chivalric or formal garb to subvert reality and fulfill romantic dreams.

7 The mix of traditional and non-traditional theatrical elements is strongly evident here: The play opens and closes with a traditional 'rousing chorus', though one which advocates 'untraditional' relationships and 'unconventional' behaviour. By bringing the audience once again into the fantasy realm of the Fourth World which begins the play and provides a unifying frame, the ending momentarily allays critical judgements that have been so pressing throughout.

powerful indicator of points of resistance to these. Besides acting as a surface marker of occupation, gender and identity, the focus on clothes, costume or dress functions in all the plays as a coercive theatrical device for ‘constructing’ or ‘deconstructing’ specifically encoded female subjectivities, and for positioning the spectator in a particular way in relation to the stage action. Each of the plays examined in this study sets up certain expectations which are reinforced, destabilised or disrupted when the complex dynamics of live theatre performance came into play.

The multiple realities of the plays cannot be separated from the dynamic of theatrical performance. Clearly, stage/audience transactions and operations need to be closely considered if we are to discover how far conventional theatrical boundaries between stage and audience, and between established oppositional binarisms (particularly male/female gender constructs) are being manipulated. The selected works have opened up variable sites of contestation where recognisable or established theatrical conventions were tested, distorted, deconstructed or re-invented. The specific project of examining how the multiple realities are constructed, and they operate differently, in each of the plays, has revealed a number of challenging forays into postmodern and carnivalesque theatre.

All three plays present fantastic worlds, are open-ended and demonstrate a marked degree of ambivalence. All exhibit a transformative or regenerative power. One of the most illuminating of these common factors is the different uses and effects of subversive humour. 9 All three plays use humour as a subversive strategy. Whether the focus is on teenage romance, fairytale distortions, class difference, lesbian desire, social conditioning, gender ambivalence, religious prejudice or sexual oppression, comic elements intervene to make the topic seductive to audiences. Each of the play texts presents a postmodern feminist perspective and, implicitly or explicitly, its own political agenda. A strong female consciousness emerges in probing enquiries into the complexities of sexual identity, ostensibly aimed to promote the female subject. In performance, these postmodern feminist strategies have the imaginative potential to bring about significant ramifications for both the female and the male spectator.

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9 Jean Betts uses humour in her plays because she knows how dangerous and subversive it can be. Interview with Jean Betts, Marie La Hood, Allen Hall Theatre, Dunedin, 11 August, 1995.
These New Zealand plays raise social, political and feminist questions that have a particular cultural and historical relevance. At the same time their subversive strategies, postmodern forms and feminist concerns connect them with contemporary women's theatre in a global context. Each, in its own way, is concerned to expose gender power imbalances through the medium of theatrical performance. By dramatically exploring or challenging fixed images, assumptions and perceptions of women established by western society’s dominant culture in a specific cultural context, the plays are able to focus on controversial issues such as the socially constructed, universal notion of ‘becoming a woman’.  

This study has looked at carnival spectacle in relation to postmodern theatre and found significant connections between Bakhtin’s carnival and postmodernism in each of the plays. Competing approaches and concepts bring out some of the tensions produced by the ‘sign language’ of the performance medium. In contemporary theatrical discourse these tensions create a constant flux of meaning between signifiers and signified and provide the impetus for an ongoing exploration of the shifting temporal and spatial boundaries of the theatre event. Each of the three chosen plays mixes traditional and non-traditional elements, and utilises re-vitalised semiotic strategies to construct its own flexible language of theatrical signs. They are examples of performance works which do not rely on an inherent nature of signs, but offer unique perceptual challenges that not only multiply or extend, but frequently disrupt ‘nature’.

These confrontational plays do more than sketch the working of oppressive uses of sexuality. They perform the transgressive, revolutionary function of creating an autonomous, liberating theatrical site for the female subject, by actively attacking restrictive binary oppositions and promoting subversive acts. Comic rituals, gothic imagery and carnival laughter create symbolic spectacles in which ‘carnival time life’ provides an intriguing parallel to theatrical performance. Each of the plays brings people together in a vividly shared experience and temporary suspension of everyday life.

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10 Simone de Beauvoir’s provocative claim that “One is not born, rather one becomes, a woman”, is examined critically in her two-volume classic book, The Second Sex, Great Britain: Jonathon Cape, 1953 (in translation). Le Deuxième Sexe, first published in 1949, has been republished and reissued many times since then.
Betts, Samuel and Forster, have each created a stage reality which, in its own unique way subverts, transforms and reproduces Bakhtin’s carnival laughter:

... it is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. 11

The dominant discourse which posits gender as a culturally constructed category, and whose representational systems depend upon the construction of woman as other, is doubly challenged in the selected plays. Their dual challenge consists of disruption of the very fabric of representation, by refusing a rigid patriarchal text, and posing new multiple performance texts with woman as potent speaking subject. These stage worlds present a plurality of subjects and a multiplicity of differences. Balanced precariously at the intersections of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and contemporary popular culture, postmodern feminism and women’s performance art, *Ophelia Thinks Harder, Lashings of Whipped Cream* and *Daughters of Heaven*, counter the dominant ideology by creating resistive and transgressive theatrical terrains. They use challenging theatrical strategies, and present codes, structures and characters which not only oppose and invert hegemonic categories, but take them apart, or put them together in ways that shake up their original meanings.

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11 Bakhtin, p. 12.
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