

life owes so much. But it remains an uphill battle: it is sad to note Norman's observation 'that, despite the proliferation of well-paid arts administrators in recent decades, the fundamental problems facing artists have remained essentially unchanged since Lilburn began composing 70 years ago' (p.8).

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*Nola Millar: A Theatrical Life*. By Sarah Gaitanos. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006. 408 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-5375.

NOLA MILLAR WAS THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR of what is now known as Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School. Running the school was the culmination of what Sarah Gaitanos quite rightly refers to as 'a theatrical life'. Millar's involvement with theatre began in her childhood: her father founded *New Zealand Theatre & Motion Picture*, New Zealand's first monthly magazine dedicated to the stage and screen. Nola worked with him on the magazine, but it was in the 1930s that her own theatrical life began. Having left Wellington East Girls' College she joined the school's Old Girls' Drama Club and performed in competitions run by the British Drama League. By 1934 she was directing plays, something she continued to do until her death in early 1974.

Amateur theatre groups in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand tended to perform light comedies and popular melodramas. Nola Millar thought that theatre should be more challenging. In 1946 she joined Wellington's Unity Theatre, a radical, left-wing group, interested in producing dramatic works with a political message. Millar directed her first Unity production in 1948, and as the Chronology of Productions Gaitanos provides indicates, it marked the beginning of a long and very productive relationship.

When Richard and Edith Campion set up a national theatre company, the New Zealand Players, in 1953, Millar was invited to be a director's assistant. She did not stay long in the position but like the Campions believed that New Zealand was ready for a professional theatre company. In 1960 her New Theatre Company took to the stage with *Macbeth*. Her next step was to combine New Theatre with a drama school. This she achieved in the late 1960s. It provided the foundation for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand Interim Drama Training School, which opened in 1970. Toi Whakaari was born.

For those interested in the history of the theatre in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand Gaitanos's book is a goldmine. She has dug deep into the archives and spoken to everyone who knew Millar — and Millar knew everyone in the theatre scene. The result is a roll call of New Zealand thespians and playwrights: James K. Baxter, the Campions, Kate Harcourt, Ray Henwood, Bruce Mason and Peter Vere-Jones all appear, along with surprises like celebrity chef Des Britten, who Millar directed in a Waipawa Musical and Dramatic Society production of Chekov's *The Wedding*.

*Nola Millar* will also be useful for those interested in the left — Millar's father, Frank, was a key player in the Public Service Association — and libraries. Alongside directing plays Nola Millar worked for many years at the Turnbull and was for a period the reference librarian at Victoria University. She was the sort of librarian historians dream of, an unpaid research assistant who loved to ferret out the facts.

Millar's approach to her library work and Gaitanos's approach to Millar's life share much in common: regardless of how insignificant a 'fact' might be, it is included; the context of the fact is less important than the actual piece of information; and the facts are assumed to speak for themselves. For a number of years Millar worked on what Gaitanos refers to as a 'definitive history' of theatre in New Zealand (p.158). It was

never published. Gaitanos worked on this book for over a decade. Her commitment is evident in the amount of information it contains, but that does not necessarily make for a satisfying biography.

Biography is a difficult genre. While often attempted in New Zealand, it is rarely done well. Nola Millar had some thoughts on biographical studies. She thought that a successful radio portrait had to 'reveal the crotchets of the subject's personality to the full', that there should be 'some conflict of opinion among the reminiscences', or the portrait should 'realise the inner conflict' of the subject (p.13). So how does Gaitanos's biography measure up against Millar's own definition?

The quirkiness of Millar's life is apparent throughout the book. She was an unusual woman. But how unusual is not something Gaitanos delves into. Millar never married and as far as Gaitanos can determine never had any 'sexual life whatsoever' (p.247). She was a serious gambler who often had to borrow money to live on. She never owned her own home or any other significant assets. She paid little attention to her appearance, cutting her own hair without the aid of a mirror, but wore a trademark beret. On one occasion, we are told, 'an extraordinary thing' happened: a gust of wind blew her beret high above the buildings (p.322). Why Gaitanos thinks it extraordinary for a hat to be blown off anyone's head in Wellington is beyond me, as is why she has included this anecdote at all. The raw material for revealing the crotchets of Millar's life are all here, but Gaitanos is too often sidetracked by flying berets to explore them.

At a time when, we are so often told, New Zealand was a dull, grey, conformist nation, Nola Millar and her contemporaries were putting on productions of cutting-edge theatrical works. She introduced many to the works of Beckett, Brecht, Gogol, Gorki and Lorca, and brought kitchen-sink dramas like *Look Back in Anger* to the local stage. She worked with innovative set and costume designers, always challenging her audiences. Gaitanos tells us little about what motivated Millar to put on such productions, or even how she found out about the plays. Millar visited Australia for a month in 1956 and spent several months in North America, Great Britain and Europe in 1967, but for the most part she was in Wellington. What did she read, who did she correspond with, how was she so well informed about what was happening on stages around the world? Gaitanos never tells us.

*Nola Millar* also fails the second of Millar's requirements. For the most part Gaitanos has used oral histories to provide information about Millar's life. There is little consideration of how oral histories are constructed so when the oral testimonies are inconsistent — when they provide instances of conflict, as Millar required — Gaitanos does not know what to do with them.

When it comes to inner conflict Gaitanos tries, in places, to explain what might have been going on, but does so in an ahistorical and ultimately unsatisfying way. The death of Millar's mother, for example, is an opportunity for Gaitanos to consult an art therapist for children suffering grief through loss, and the resource and information manager of a centre for young people suffering from loss, trauma and grief. What they know about children in 1910s New Zealand is not considered. Generally, though, Gaitanos is silent about Millar's inner life.

On Millar's own criteria, then, *Nola Millar* is not a successful biography. It is a useful source of information about mid-twentieth-century theatre and cultural life in New Zealand, but as an exploration of the life of a significant and complex theatre director it offers readers a dress rehearsal rather than a command performance.

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