THE INUAGURAL NGAIO MARSH LECTURE: Elric J. Hooper, MBE

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Initially, today, I was going to speak about the influence of the electronic revolution on the contemporary theatre and how it has affected the stage. After a while, this seemed so dour and so dull that I ground to a halt. I then thought how this series of lectures had been founded to celebrate one of the most various and intense talents this city has produced - a writer, a painter and one of the country's best theatre directors – Ngaio Marsh.

I realized that while so much has been written about her, it has been largely about her detective fiction and not so much about her theatre career, despite that being widely acknowledged. I realized that I had an intimate knowledge of her methods and a personal acquaintance with her powers as a teaching director.

Furthermore time has passed since the nationalistic reaction to her work and her doubts about the New Zealand theatre in this country. Those critics who accused her of all the colonial sins are now themselves seen, with their ideas of New Zealand speech, politics and history as just the succeeding generation. They have faults as apparent.

Today, Ngaio Marsh's Englishness, authoritarianism and theatricality can be seen as a time – and a very good one – in New Zealand's artistic history.

So today, I am going to look over the Ngaio Marsh theatre legacy: its origins, it peculiarities and its joys. Maybe "joys" is a strange word for someone who, for the larger part of her theatrical life produced tragedies, but that is how her great contribution is remembered and that is how, when examined today, it appears.

It is thirty years since Ngaio Marsh died and just over forty years since her last major production of a Shakespeare play. A whole generation. Only a handful of people survive who knew her ways in the theatre. You would have to be middle-aged to remember her last productions. The press clippings are faded. The photographs – do, as most theatrical photographs – look, well let's say, odd. Even the memory of her extraordinary persona and height has diminished. Who remembers the elegant figure in the sealskin coat? Who recalls the deep throbbing voice? Who can summon the arching ash of her cigarette, neglected during an intense talk on the play? And where, now, are those strange places we rehearsed? The rowing club storage shed, the church hall in the south of the city, the abandoned foundry. And Ngaio's large thermos of hot soup which tasted of garlic and strange herbs. The productions were always rehearsed in deep winter and presented toward the end of the middle term, just before students had to turn to and study for their finals, so we were always wrapped in wool and wore heavy boots. Ngaio's friends used to drift into the rehearsals to see how things were going and distinguished painters and writers sometimes appeared and sat huddled in an overcoat near the director and the fire that warmed her. She, of course wore trousers and boots and a high-necked sweater.

Before her lay the text. It was cut up and pasted on to one leaf. On the opposite was a drawing of how the stage would look. These drawings I later discovered owed much to Titian and Rembrandt but were ultimately her own theatrical conception.

The big day was Sunday. The cast would assemble at about two and we would put together the ensemble scenes, which we had rehearsed in the weekday evenings. Later the larger sections of the play were put together before the whole thing. It was all very efficient. We rehearsed for six weeks but I don't recall tension or stress other than the company's desire to do it right. Ngaio's authority was absolute without forcing or shouting. Sometimes we would go on till ten thirty of eleven but never past that. Ngaio knew she was dealing with students who were studying during the day.

One realizes now how well the rehearsals were arranged. The calling of scenes during the week was meticulously done, though one was not aware of the fact. The play was divided into small sections and rehearsed in detail. One knew that Ngaio knew where everything fitted. Having since worked with extremely scholarly directors, I am astonished that the student actors came along with as many different editions of the plays as there were parts – complete editions, single plays and sheets of paper.

Ngaio was not particularly musical. In her selection for Roy Plumbley's famous programme *Desert Island Discs*, six of her eight recordings were speech, but she saw each play as a symphony with contrasting sections. Slowly the great symphonic structure of the play would emerge, "the movements" as Ngaio would say. This was apparent in the rehearsal room before it hit the stage. And then it was the theatre, the technical and the opening.

Incidentally, the music to her productions was always exact and atmospheric. Douglas Lilburn wrote the 1943 *Hamlet* score in three days. Later scores were as specific. In the realms of music, setting, props and clothes Ngaio did not seem to be autocratic. Rather, the plan was so well laid down that supporting artists knew what she wanted.

To us this all seemed the only way to do things. We had little conception that this was a Victorian technique modified by 'thirties *avante garde*. Only years later in the light of English theatre experience and the voices of local criticism did we suspect feet of clay.

Ngaio was a Victorian. She was born in 1895. She was an only child and went to a dame school in Merivale before being entered into St Margaret's College initial intake in 1910. Then in 1913 she enrolled in the Canterbury College School of Art – that building which is right at the Hereford Street/Rolleston Avenue. She stayed there until 1919. She supported herself with tutoring.

Much of her time was occupied with amateur theatricals. Both her parents were ardent performers. Her mother, Rose Marsh, was a local celebrity. She appeared in one of Ngaio's early pieces called *The Moon Princess* which *The Press* said was "a clever little play". And her father, a bank clerk in the Bank of New Zealand, a softer character, played character parts.

One has to look at the *Christchurch Star* of the period to see how much and how refined the theatrical activity of the Victorian and Edwardian era was. With no cinema yet, the music halls and the travelling companies did excellent trade in Christchurch. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was staged only three months after its London premiere. What was not given by these agencies was supplemented by the amateurs in several and many groups. It was here that the Marshes flourished and it was here that young Ngaio learnt her early craft. Talk of plays at the dinner table and helping prepare for some event would have been routine to her.

For example, Ngaio saw how a lighting plot was recorded for touring companies in that era.

The stage was marked out in large areas by coloured pencil with the actors' moves drawn in around them and a brief description of the time of day and the atmosphere required. With this in hand the technician had a fair idea what was required. Ngaio used this technique throughout her career. It proved most useful and time saving.

It was during these early years, she formed the friendships that were to last throughout her life. In the art world it was Eve Page and Olivia Spencer Bower and in the countryside it was the Aclands of Mount Peel and the Rhodes of Meadowbank. Though not wealthy, the Marsh family had status. So Ngaio was part of the local gentry – or at least on the edges of it. Indeed, Ngaio had to be a little more posh than those around her. There was an element of disguise or play acting in her patrician attitudes. This air of being slightly on the outside gave her fiction a unique atmosphere -which appealed particularly in America. Her personality and wide cultural interests made her one of the chosen, one of the hierarchy of the colony to whom England was Home. Standard English speech was *de rigueur* – especially if one was born in New Zealand. Ngaio's voice was just right.

Though until 1927, Ngaio thought of herself as a painter, she wrote articles and poems for the *Christchurch Sun*. She also wrote a play called *The Medallion* which she said 'must have been very bad in a slightly promising way.' (It is curious that given her literary gift and her love of the theatre, she was never quite able to adapt or create a totally successful stage work.)

She showed her play, *The Medallion*, to Allan Wilkie, the head of a Shakespearian company who was to tour New Zealand in 1919 and 1920. They invited her to join the company. And she did. She was 24. She seems to have played small parts and stage managed. Her height and deep voice made her hard to cast, and from her anecdotes, it seems she played young men in some plays. Though not entirely so, the plays were by Shakespeare. A fresh one was given each night.

She was with the company for less than a year but the influence of Allan Wilkie was to remain with her. She continued to correspond with Wilkie until his death in 1970 at the age of 87, She wrote an introduction to his memoirs. The memoirs themselves were rejected by none other than T S Eliot and lost. Wilkie's effect on her was great.

Though romantic and declamatory and being far from a Henry Irving, the moon-faced Allan Wilkie presented Shakespeare's plays, according to Ngaio "with thrust and drive and an absence of tarting up." This could almost be a description of her own productions. His stripped-down presentation of *Macbeth*, played swiftly, with one interval, was the kind of thing that stuck. Wilkie's forthright delivery was also a persistent memory for Ngaio.

After the Wilkie tour, she toured with the Rosemary Rees Company and back in Christchurch, tutored for Wauchop School of Drama and Dancing. In 1924, they performed her play, *Little Housebound.*

Still thinking of herself as a painter, in 1927, she exhibited with The Group. Theirs was a kind of protest against the academically conservative Canterbury College School of Art. It is interesting to find Ngaio among the *avant garde* after her very formal upbringing. This is indicative of a strange split in Ngaio, a basic conservatism and an attachment to the *avant garde*, a following of a basic romantic formula and an eye-out for the new and the daring.

But painting gradually faded away – though never entirely. She said, " I failed to get on terms with myself." She was always a dab hand at a quick sketch and her visual training was to become one of the leading features of her direction.

She was well read in the contemporary theatre literature.

William Poel's Shakespeare reforms in which the stage was stripped of scenery so that the play could flow forward unencumbered by scenic changes. Edward Gordon Craig's shadow and mass and towering images. Leopold Jessner's staircases, ramps and multileveled platforms were familiar to her. Above all, she had read Stanislavsky and his philosophy of acting, staging and company management. Ngaio was prepared - but for what?

In 1928, not an actress, a writer nor a painter, simply a cultured member of the Christchurch middle classes, she took ship to England for the first time. She was 33 years old.

She made straight for her friend Nellie Rhodes. Together they founded a decorating business with a shop in Knightsbridge called "Touch and Go". This lasted until 1932, when she had to return to New Zealand to look to her mother. Rose Marsh died that year.

In London in 1931, she had settled down one wet Sunday afternoon with some school notebooks and began what was to be her first detective novel, *A Man Lay Dead* (1934). Between 1934 and 1982 Ngaio produced 32 detective novels. She built a reputation as one of the four Queens of Crime, beside Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham.

Though comfortably off, Ngaio Marsh was never very rich despite her success. This was as much due to the draconian English tax laws and her decisions to lead a double life, part in England and part in New Zealand. She had great problems with the tax man. (Even very late in life she showed me a tax demand for twenty thousand pounds that had appeared out of nowhere. She wept.) She once said that she wrote detective novels to indulge her passion for theatre.

Her growing renown as a detective novelist and her frequent attendance at theatre made her part of the theatrical world. These liaisons were strengthened when figures like the Oliviers and Emlyn Williams visited Christchurch.

But the era of her theatrical education continued during the late twenties and early thirties. This was of course the period of Noel Coward, but it was not the Coward comedies that most intrigued her.

This was the period of continental theory. Stanislavsky was being read. Komasajevski's Checkov productions were the talk of the town. Jessner's steps, stage settings with large steps and platforms of no distinct local were being imitated. In 1937, Orson Welles presented Julius Caesar as a fascist tragedy in New York - an event that was to have a dividend in Christchurch in the early fifties. I am suggesting that these years of the late twenties and early thirties were a late influence on Ngaio's theatre vocabulary – at least in her scenic mode. The economy of these methods ran parallel to the poverty of the company with which she was about to become associated.

Between 1938 and 19 48, her chief concern was her father's failing health. The war and the increasing frailty of her father kept her in Cashmere. She produced, on average, one detective novel a year. She also produced four middle brow plays for the local repertory societies – among them *The Late Christopher Bean* by Emlyn Williams, *A Man's House* by John Drinkwater and *The Anatomist* by James Bridie. She was already highly regarded as a director.

The Canterbury College Drama Society approached her to direct Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound*. This anti-war play was staged in 1941. A University, after all, was the only place where in wartime there were enough grown men available. It was performed in The Little Theatre with some success.

Ngaio then staged *The Soul of Nicholas Snyders* by Jerome K Jerome and Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. I mention this to show that her attention was not yet centred on Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was considered box office poison.

She proposed doing *Hamlet* in the Little Theatre. It had not been seen in Christchurch since Allan Wilkie's production in the Theatre Royal twenty years before. What is more, she proposed doing the play in modern dress. Overseas this was not extraordinary, it had been done at the Old Vic in 1938 - but it was for Christchurch.

It was wartime and supplies of satin and velvet were not available and affordable, it was said, hence the modern clothing. The three ceremonial scenes fitted into evening dress very well. Suits and day dress were more easily available. Even pipes were seen and cigarette smoke was puffed in the face of Claudius, the king . Polonius was dressed in Sir Joseph Ward's formal coat borrowed from the museum and the female courtiers in long dance frocks. But maybe the chief reason was that the Hamlet, Jack Henderson had had infantile paralysis and one of his legs was shorter than the other. Trousers hid what tights could not.

Hamlet, the text, exists in three versions.

The first quarto is a very imperfect account taken down in shorthand and published as a pirate edition. It does have a swifter narrative and the speeches of Volta/emand, the ambassador, are accurate.

The second quarto is the authorized version. It is much longer than the text required for the theatre. However, when it is done it runs about four and a half hours and is known as *Hamlet* in it entirety.

The final version, and the one that seems to represent Shakespeare's company's own playing version, appears in the folio of 1623. It was this that Ngaio cut to form the text of her famous 1943 version of *Hamlet*.

Ngaio was looking for a workable, engrossing theatre script that would not overload the audience. She was creating a theatrical entertainment not demonstrating a literary text. She also had to get the audience out in time for the last trams from the Square at 10.30. I think this must be voiced to counteract some of the criticism that was to come her way in the future.

Above all in Jack Henderson, she had a Hamlet. He was an ex-Christ's College boy. English by birth. His father was a Calcutta judge who has sent his son to Christ's College to get him out of the way of the war. He had a power and a grace needed by the prince.

(The importance of the Prince of Denmark comes up in a very strange photograph of Ngaio Marsh, to be seen on the net, dressed as Hamlet looking sombre in tights and cloak with a small moustache inked in. She is in her twenties perhaps.)

The production was presented without acknowledging Ngaio as the director, merely as the invigilating eye. No one was under any illusions. Every lighting cue – managed from a single switch and every grouping bespoke "Ngaio Marsh".

The production was a huge success. This was not just for its intrinsic worth but for the light it shone in the dark wartime world. It is odd but it was the tragedies of Shakespeare, not the comedies, which attracted the warmest responses during the war. Here was an entertainment of the highest worth. It became a hot ticket and the season was crammed. The Little Theatre became a sardine can. In an era before strict fire regulations, the audience hung over lighting beams and even encroached on the edges of the stage.

The season was not extendable, with the final term coming up and exams had to be sat, but a return season was given in November.

The stellar quality of her Hamlet and her Laertes (a young law student called Paul Molineaux) gave Ngaio the idea of presenting *Othello*. So the following July, now fully acknowledged as the director, Ngaio staged *The Moor of Venice*. It was again a huge success.

Although there were mature players in the small roles –actors like Dundas Walker – the cast was made up of students in late teens and early twenties. They were raw and eager but lacked technique. Ngaio taught them. And herein lies one of the recurring criticisms of her work – autocracy. These young people were dominated by her, her diction, her phrasing, her interpretation. There was no doubt who was in charge. But without her these students would have been formless. This was good in these early days but as time went on and actors matured the same dominance and style persisted.

It was decided to tour the two plays, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, to the other main centres and despite the restrictions of the war, the heat of the season, and the variety of venues, between December and February 1944 and 1945, the Canterbury College University Drama Society played in Dunedin, Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch again.

Ngaio Marsh's name was made nationwide as a director of Shakespeare. And from here on, it was as a presenter of Shakespeare that she was best known and admired in New Zealand. It must be pointed out that apart from a three week season, in London, of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, given in 1951, no theatrical production of Ngaio Marsh was seen outside New Zealand or Australia. Indeed by far the greatest number of her productions after this were done with the students and were seen only in Christchurch,

At the end of the tour, her company broke up. Paul Molineux went off to law and Jack Henderson was going to take up training at The Old Vic.

There was a sting in the tale. A hundred pound cheque was handed to Jack Henderson as good will. It was discovered that he was not departing alone. He was going off with the wife of the company's manager, Dan O'Conner. The cheque was returned. Ngaio felt betrayed.

Hamlet was the last on stage performance that Jack Henderson gave. He spent a successful life as a television producer in England.

In 1946 Ngaio published her most important theatre book. It was called *Play Production*. It was a mere pamphlet aimed at school children but contained such common sense and subtle advice, that many who read it carried it as core instruction. Its swift illustrations became indelible for a generation. It further enhanced Ngaio's status.

In 1948, the Old Vic Company, headed by the Oliviers, toured Australia and New Zealand.

In Christchurch, Ngaio Marsh directed the first act of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as an after the show entertainment for the Oliviers. (I wonder how they anticipated this having just performed *The School for Scandal*.) It was, however, a great success and the Oliviers expressed their appreciation. They particularly admired the work of Brigid ~~Linehan~~/Lenihan who played the step-daughter. Dan O'Connor so liked the production that he took it on tour to Australia where it had a great success. This was a play that was to be part of the Marsh tradition – Pirandello and Shakespeare.

Originally performed in 1920 in Rome, *Six Characters* was not a success, but soon after, in Milan it had an outstanding reception and became a modern classic.

An Italian theatre company are rehearsing on a bare stage. Suddenly they are aware of six beings among them. These are, people from real life wanting to have their tragic story told. What follows is a tragic-comedy of the distance between reality and the theatre. It is at once very funny and heart-breaking. It was with *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Shakespeare that Ngaio hoped to start a state-supported enterprise.

Ngaio had already had the idea for a national theatre of New Zealand. But the attitude toward public subsidy was weak.

The Little Theatre was burnt down in 1953. This seemed to be the end of a "golden era" which had begun in 1943 and the production of *Hamlet*. This had been because the war and its aftermath had left New Zealand starved of theatre of excellence and imagination. New Zealand had been cut off from the world. Ngaio and the students had filled a gap. Soon the world would come flooding back and the old norms would be re-established.

It had been a curious success. An achieved production was followed by the natural disintegration of the company that had achieved it. The troupe went off into civilian life to be lawyer, engineers, teachers and whatever the University had trained them for. There was no professional company to hire, train and expose the native talent. Radio was the only outlet for theatrical talent – and that was not enough.

In 1948, Ngaio's father died. The daughter was released. Ngaio's long sea voyages and stays in Europe began again.

In London, in late 1950, she staged a brief and unsatisfactory season of *Six Characters at Swiss Cottage.* She was not allowed to use Brigid Lenihan and Yvonne Mitchell played the step daughter. This, the first time she had used professional actors, was a great disappointment to her.

Whilst in London, she formed The British Commonwealth Theatre Company. This was an assemblage of actors from England, Australia and New Zealand. They rehearsed three plays *The Devil's Disciple, Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Twelfth Night* and toured them to Australia and New Zealand during that year. This was Ngaio's attempt at founding a national theatre.

They were not a success. There were contentions within the company. Houses were poor. Notices were mixed, though *Six Characters* was much admired in Australia. The tour wound to an ignominious end in Blenheim.

This was the first time I encountered Ngaio's work. Sitting as one of about forty people in the Theatre Royal, a 14 year old boy, I was uncomprehending as to why the house was not full. *Twelfth Night* was lively and full of invention. (I did not know then that Feste was being played by John Schlesinger, later to be a famous film director.) And *Six Characters* had a tragi-comic quality that I have not seen reproduced anywhere else. (I later saw Ralph Richardson and Barbara Jefford in it in London and did not get the same sense of anarchy and fate.)

The leading lady was Bridget Lenihan, a powerhouse in both plays. The entrance of the six characters I shall never forget. Throughout the first scene stage hands crossed the stage with large flats. We got used to them. Then suddenly there were the six characters. They had come on behind a piece of scenery and were left starkly on mid stage. Exquisite artifice.

But it was 1951. The country was getting on with its life. These were merely good actors not big names. The productions were spare. New Zealand did not want classics or *avant garde*. Already, the Australian, J C Williamsons were sending complete and starry casts in the latest musicals from America.

The tour ended in a loss. Most of the actors returned to London, some to good careers. Some stayed and enhanced the New Zealand Players.

Years later in England I worked with one of these actors. He had continued in the profession until it became too difficult to maintain a wife and children. Then after retirement had gone back into the business and was making a fair living as an older man. He spoke about the tour with fondness but with criticism. Ngaio was a poetic lady who read verses to the cast. She did not have the heft to handle egotistical career-bound professionals.

I think it has to be said: Ngaio was at her best with amateurs, people she could teach and over whom she had sway. Maybe she showed too much respect for professional actors.

Maybe, as in her detective fiction, her image of professional performers was not quite right. The actors in her fictions tend always to be acting. It bespeaks someone who is looking in from the outside. Also the standards of acting were beginning to change. The post war years were a silent approach to the Angry Young Man of 1956.

One of the great features of Ngaio's Shakespeare were the moments that can only be described as "Theatrical." Hamlet, at the end of the speech which concluded the first part, "The play's the thing whereby I'll catch the conscience of the King," threw the loose sheets of the play in the air and stood there while the leaves descended around him. In *Julius Caesar*, hands were bathed in blood. In Lear, the eyes were ripped out. These were features of Victorian Shakespeare as derived from her tutor, Allan Wilkie. They were marvellous but were they right for a world that was cooling down? As the classic theatre became Brechtian in the sixties, such things did not seem quite right.

Ngaio's London trips now made her involvement with Canterbury College University Drama Society more halting if no less intense. And without a home, with the loss of the Little Theatre, the company was forever in search of a venue.

In 1953, the University allowed the company to use the Great Hall. They were going to stage *Julius Caesar*.

An Elizabethan stage was devised – perhaps the first in the country. The auditorium was half a basin. Seats arched around three sides and at the bottom was the playing area. In the middle of this was a revolving tower designed by Tom Taylor. Actor entrances were made from beneath the audience by means of vomitoriums. The clothes were modern – thirtyish, in fact. The soldiers were clad in fascist gear. It owed something to Orson Welles' 1937 production but it was otherwise completely Ngaio – its speed, energy and "theatrics."

I was still at high school and it was my first sight of Ngaio Marsh herself, walking up the embankment and easily swinging her leg over the rail. I was stunned by the production. It is still my favourite of her works.

Three years later, in 1956, I was appearing in a student revue in the Civic Theatre and Gerald Lascelles told me that Ngaio Marsh and Charles Brash wanted to meet me. I went up to the empty stage after the performance. Two figures were standing there. The man was reticent. The woman was flamboyant. She was dressed in a handsome, three-quarter length seal skin coat. She was wearing a grey woollen skirt – not trousers. Her hair was wildly dressed. She smoked a cigarette. She asked me what I had been doing. Said *Macbeth.*

"Not the thane!" she said in alarm.

"No, A lord. Lennox." I said putting her at her ease.

She mentioned that she was about to direct *Lear.*

A few weeks later, I auditioned for Ngaio. I was chosen to play the Fool in King Lear.

It was a memorable production with Mervyn Glue as the King, salivating so copiously that looking up into the lights one did not have to imagine the rain and storm. The costumes and set were blue grey. The set was a curved podium which a descending ramp on one side and steps down the other. In the centre was a kind of shelter for hovel. It worked extremely well.

In 1957, I played Chorus in *Henry V*.

In 1958, before leaving to take up a place a London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, LAMDA, a place that I got on Ngaio's recommendation, I played Hamlet.

It was the grilling I had for Hamlet which is the most memorable.

The fool is an important but not a long role and depends as much on listening as talking. Chorus is a personage in isolation and I was coached by myself at odd moments between the major rehearsals, But with Hamlet you are in the thick and the thin of it, in the scenes and soliloquies.

I spent hours up at Ngaio's house going over the text. I was completely submerged. I knew what she was saying was right. If only my 22 year old voice was as deep and authoritative as hers. Her head quivered slightly as she spoke the lines, injecting meaning and feeling into them. If only I could get that feeling.

To get away from ancient and modern, from Elizabethan and contemporary, it had been decided to perform the tragedy in Regency costume. It was also decided to give the scenes in the corrupt first quarto order, for the sake of swiftness. Annette Facer was Ophelia. Mervyn Glue was Claudius. Jonathan Elsom was Laertes.

We performed, as we did *Lear* and *Henry* in the large Civic Theatre.

It seemed to go well. The play went smoothly. The techs all worked. We were home.

Nobody could say that Ngaio was not a risk taker. If she scented talent she was after exposing it. We discussed Ernest Jones's Oedipal theory of the play and in the closet scene in which Hamlet reproaches his mother before the entrance of the ghost, Hamlet and Gertrude, the very young but mature-looking Jenny Barrow, almost had sex.

The production finished with a spectacular fall from the top of the podium. I was bruised but the interior and exterior of the play had been served.

Not long after the season I went to London to study.

Here I saw Ngaio and we went to the theatre together. She was always like a little child in the house, attentive and concentrated – though sometimes very sharp in her observations.

She was always encouraging when she came to see work one was doing. Her pride was obvious.

After I left Christchurch, the Canterbury University Drama Society as it now was could not call on Ngaio so frequently but nevertheless in the next decade she directed *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1959, *Macbeth* in 1962, *Henry IV Part One* in 1963, *Julius Caesar* in 1964, and *Twelfth Night* in 1967.

Two things were becoming apparent.

She was depending on her old stalwarts, actors she had trained over the years like Mervyn Glue, Annette Facer, and Bill Scannell. The cast of *Twelfth Night* was made up largely of old hands.

Secondly, although she made changes and deepened the interpretation, a play like the 1964 *Julius Caesar* was very similar to the version of the same play given in 1953.

Then in 1969, at the age of 74, she was persuaded to direct *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

There were some old hands in the cast like Mervyn Glue, but the cast was young and vibrant drawn from a particularly talented crop of students. Sam Neill played Theseus, for example.

One day in London, at lunch she spoke to me about the project and suggested I come out and teach, assist and play Puck. She said she could get my fare from the Arts Council. I said I would love to come if it did not cost her anything and so it was agreed. Only some time after the production I learnt the Arts Council had failed and Ngaio had privately had paid for my being in New Zealand. It had deprived her of a trip to England.

Despite the competition for the entertainment dollar in Christchurch at the time – a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and great concerts – the production played to full houses.

It was a glorious time. I taught and pottered. Ngaio was ill for a few days during the rehearsal time but with Annette Facer standing by nothing was lost. Several of the cast went into the acting profession. This final production of Ngaio's at the theatre named for her left her exhausted but happy. I think.

In October 1972, to inaugurate the opening of the James Hay Theatre, Ngaio produced *Henry V* for the third time. It began with one of her "theatricalities." In secret, Jonathan Elsom had had a costume for Chorus made. It was Shakespeare. When he appeared it was a deeply satisfying moment as well as a surprise to all present. There was William Shakespeare saying "O for a Muse of Fire."

A couple of years later she did mount a charming recital of the sonnets for Johnathan Elsom called *Sweet Mr Shakespeare*, but the inaugural production at the Town Hall of *Henry V* was Ngaio Marsh's last.

She lived for another seven years. Her attendance at The Court Theatre was always an occasion. She was joyous when she approved of something like *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and quiet when she did not.

On Sunday afternoons, I used to bike up to Valley Road and over tea we would discuss plays and performances, both at home and overseas. She was always very astute in judgments, Fair and warm. Ngaio was at her most unguarded and was very funny.

She was also very kind - offering sympathy when my going was tough. Sometimes she cried.

One February morning, in 1982, Helen Holmes who had played Lady Macbeth for her and kept an eye on her at her home in Cashmere, rang me at the theatre to tell me Ngaio Marsh had died.

Ngaio was a woman with two reputations. The main and perhaps her most lasting one is as a great classic detective writer – a Queen of Crime. Her 32 detective novels with Inspector Alleyn at their centre continue in popularity, especially in America, where her English class and theatricality are seen as a heightened reality not as a fault.

Her theatrical career was almost entirely in New Zealand, of an amateur nature and associated with one city, Christchurch and one organization, the drama society of Canterbury University. Yet she became a figure of immense power and influence.

Her authority came from the respect accorded her for her detective fiction, despite the fact that it was little regarded in New Zealand. Why did she not write proper novels? The cult status now accorded the classic detective novel did not exist then. Nevertheless her fame gave her authority.

Although a respected theatre being and director in the late thirties through her work for the Christchurch and Dunedin Repertory societies, it was not until the early 1940s, when she was 45, with her productions of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, and the tours that followed, that her theatrical status was truly established.

Here, in war-deprived New Zealand, was a company performing great plays to full houses, with imagination and deep seriousness. Shakespeare was entertainment.

New Zealand had no Arts Council to subsidize this kind of effort. The war made visits from overseas companies very rare. The entertainment available was of the light and bright variety, raising funds and spirits. The trams stopped at 10.30. Fortunately there was no real professional theatre, so union rules and fire regulations were not enforced. (Running a show on one plug was a possibility.) The audience was fresh and unsophisticated – by which I mean it was not unlike Shakespeare's original audience innocent, intelligent and eager.

There was also the mortality of the war. By 1943 and *Hamlet*, *The Press* carried death notices. There is a photograph of Ngaio with her father. He carries a golf club and Ngaio wears a uniform, a beret and carries a satchel.

The production of *Hamlet* was gift. Out of it grew Othello. In 1946, the small booklet, *Play Production,* had immense influence. Its simple principles, designed for children and young people had lasting effect on older performers and directors.

It defined the Ngaio Marsh style.

Years later Mervyn Thompson, the dramatist and critic, described her techniques thus.

"Everything in large sweeps. Spectacular visual patterns. Emphasis on swift movement forward of narrative. Rousing climaxes! Large emphasis on tonal variations. Character secondary to "musical" elements. Good popular Shakespeare. Great"orchestration." Nothing "dry" left in. Not much in the way of politics either."

This is a fair summation of the Marsh style – except it was written at the height of the reaction to the romantic theatre in the seventies.

Ngaio's theatrical career falls into four periods,

There was early era before she was 45 when she was directing the Repertories in plays by Coward, Williams and Brodie.

Then came the meeting with the Canterbury College Drama Society in 1940 which led to the 1943 *Hamlet*, the 1944 *Othello* and ultimately to the 1948 *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. This era ended with the burning down of The Little Theatre,

Then came the search for a home for the Shakespeare productions that had become expected, so for the next decade there was a search for a home. The plays were performed irregularly in The Civic Theatre – an auditorium Ngaio did not like. With the exception of the initial *Julius Caesar* in the Great Hall - *Lear, Henry V, Hamlet, Antony and Cleopatra, Macbeth, Henry IV Part One* and *Julius Caesar* again were given in The Civic. This decade constituted the greatest amount of her work.

And the fourth phase began with her entry into the theatre that was named for her, The Ngaio Marsh Theatre at The University where at the age of 72 in 1967 she directed *Twelfth Night.* Two years later came *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1972 at the age of 77 she directed the inaugural production at the James Hay Theatre. And at 80 she directed Jonathan Elsom in his assembly of enacted sonnets as *Sweet Mr Shakespeare*.

In 1962, Ngaio was asked to deliver the Macmillan Brown lectures. She, of course, picked the theatre as her subject. They were called "The Three Cornered World", by which she meant the director, the actor and the audience. They are written in her fresh and amusing style.

The director was the lens which focused the light of the author's vision. The actor, Stanislavsky-like, drew on himself to convey the meaning and the emotions. The audience sat like a black cat ready to pounce –or not.

This all seemed civil and inspired but even in 1962, it already sounded slightly reactionary in a world that had been introduced to Brecht, Grotowski and Brook. Ngaio understood the new wave with her head but not with her heart. Her heart was with Allan Wilkie and the contributions of Poel, Craig, Jessner and Stanislavsky.

But looking at her work now, one can see it as the strong current that supported theatre between 1940 and 1970 in the time between the war and the emergence of the professional theatre. What would New Zealand theatre be without her? One can see now that her imperialism, the criticism of New Zealand speech, the championing of Shakespeare were of a time. The era that followed with its cults and curiosities was as open to criticism.

The sadness of the theatre is that the moment the last word of the productions is spoken, it lives on only in the photographs and the memories of the spectators. Ngaio Marsh's detective fiction will keep her name alive in the world, but her theatre will remain only in the heads of the last spectators and the history books. This talk was a clamour against such forgetting.

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