

From Cabaret To Apocalypse: Red Mole's *Cabaret Capital Strut* And *Ghost Rite*

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Red Mole's own history recounts that, during their January 1977 tour as the opening act for Split Enz, while taking time out in 'Veint's Tearooms above the main road of Gore' *Cabaret Capital Strut* was invented – 'a satirical investigation of the national psyche.' ('More About Your Mole' 11) In fact, the possibility of a topical, populist, art cabaret (all contradictions intended) had been implicit all along in Red Mole's work, ever since *Cabaret Paris Spleen*, invoking Baudelaire's Paris, was used to launch Red Mole's magazine *Spleen* at The Performer's Theatre in Courtenay Place, Wellington, on 26 and 27 September, 1975. In fact *Spleen* itself, a magazine dedicated to the fine and performing arts, but full of gossip, scandal, provocation, and a variety of voices and styles, was a kind of cabaret in print. And *Cabaret Capital Strut*, punk, engaged, raw, anarchic, sophisticated, matched *Spleen* as a weekly dose of theatrical journalese in Wellington in 1977.

Cabaret Capital Strut was a unique creation within the history of experimental theatre in New Zealand. It is the only instance of an experimental company taking full managerial control of a specific venue – Carmen's nightclub, The Balcony – and playing there for an extended period (seven months). At the same time as taking over Carmen's, core Red Mole members, Sally Rodwell and Alan Brunton, along with associates Arthur Baysting, Jean Clarkson, and Jim and Jenny Stevenson moved in together to share the old German Embassy in Claremont Grove, Mount Victoria, a vast, rambling two storey wooden structure with plenty of room for making masks, building props and rehearsing sketches. So, The Balcony acquired a workshop.

After they returned from the Split Enz tour, Deborah Hunt and Sally Rodwell of Red Mole approached Carmen at The Balcony with an offer of an act which would

include topless dancing and fire-eating. Deborah Hunt had learnt fire-eating from circus performer Tony Radcliff of the Whirlings Circus and she had been using her fire-eating regularly in Red Mole's work for some time. Hunt and Rodwell's venture was a way of making a living as performers, but more than this, it was a chance to enter the carnie world of nightclubs and strip shows. As Sally Rodwell states in her film *Zucchini Roma*: 'My first experience in the dressing room at the back of Carmen's was the most incredible thing of my life . . . Oh, it was fantastic!' Carmen was most famous for her transvestite performers, her queens, though she employed straight female and male strippers as well. In *Zucchini Roma* there is a scene where Rodwell, Arthur Baysting and Jean Clarkson (Baysting) visit two of Carmen's queens, Maureen Price and Jeanette McLaughlin, twenty years later and now ensconced in the quiet suburbia of their state house. Rodwell says to them 'It [Carmen's] was like a carnival' but Maureen Price replies, 'No, we thought *you* were the carnival!'

Carmen's own memories of Red Mole's time at The Balcony, recorded in her book, *My Life*, describe 'Debbra and Sue [Deborah and Sally]' as 'girls who worked for me as dancers' and who 'joined the Red Mole show.' She describes her situation with regard to the nightclub as 'I wanted a break' and her tone implies she generously gave Red Mole a chance to try their luck: 'Their production proved to be quite popular.' (Carmen 174) Red Mole, on the other hand, present themselves as rescuers of a failing business: 'The declining fortunes of this transvestite strip-joint present an opportunity.' (Brunton 1989b) Whatever the nature of the synergy, Red Mole certainly benefited from the deal.

The Balcony was an exciting place to be: crowded, smoky, with mirrored walls shrouded in the deep reds and golds of Carmen's theatrical tat, it had atmosphere that evoked other art cabarets – the *Schall und Rauch* (Noise and Smoke) in Berlin in the 1920s or the Black Cat in Paris in the 1890s. Ian Fraser in the *Listener* noted *Cabaret Capital Strut*'s connections to its history and origins and its possible benefits for the future:

In scorching itself into the memory, the Red Mole cabaret passes the real test of effective theatre. But it does more than that. At the beginning of the century the popular cabaret of Bierbaum, Wedekind and company laid the foundations for a revitalised German theatre. If Red Mole can be

enticed to stay around they may do something similar for us. In my opinion they are halfway there already. (Fraser 28)

Red Mole spliced Kiwi drollery and Kiwi sentiment with the low-life, high-art end of European Modernism. For Red Mole cabaret was vulgar, using low humour and a democratic impulse to slaughter sacred cows, both social and also dramatic. Red Mole's cabaret went looking for a new kind of theatre in the past, as Fraser astutely recognised.

Three factors contributed significantly to the popular success of *Cabaret Capital Strut*. First, there was the topicality and political satire. Deborah Hunt's Muldoon send-up, complete with pig nose, was a regular favourite of every show. As Arthur Baysting says in *Zucchini Roma*: 'Deborah could get ten laughs before she even opened her mouth.' This aspect brought in a large chunk of the liberal middle class, an audience who would normally have gone to Downstage rather than a strip club. Ian Wedde had already suggested in *Spleen* that 'Downstage [. . .] should be handed over to Carmen, to run at a profit.' (Wedde 15) The second factor was rock music. Various bands and musicians played at *Cabaret Capital Strut*. The most notable was Midge Marsden and the Country Flyers (Marsden, Richard Kennedy, Neil Hannan and Bud Hooper). The Country Flyers became attached to Red Mole as their band and moved to Auckland with the Moles at the end of 1977. Rock music drew another section of the entertainment audience of Wellington into Red Mole's orbit. The third vital factor was the sexiness of the venue, already well established, and the fact that Red Mole continued to build on this. Hunt and Rodwell's s&m dance number to J.J. Cale's song 'Cocaine' was one of the most popular turns. Topicality plus rock music plus sexiness was a winning formula in the heart of Wellington. For a brief, brilliant time The Balcony became one of those magic venues, much as Downstage had been in its first two years. *Cabaret Capital Strut* opened on Sunday 13 March 1977. The back cover of *Spleen* 7 for March 1977 announced: 'Red Mole Enterprises Proudly Presents *Cabaret Capital Strut*, The Balcony, 57A Victoria St, Every Sunday 7pm.' The cabaret on the page had moved onto the stage.

That first show featured Christina [Ngahaia] Asher, Arthur Baysting, Alan Brunton, Deborah Hunt, Jenny Stevenson and Sally Rodwell, with Kris Klocek, a pianist called Brendan and Jonathan Besser providing music and Peter Frater and Tim Hunt as technicians. The popularity of the *Cabaret* quickly expanded and from 22

May onwards once a week became Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. On 4 August, Thursday was added and, from 29 August to 25 September, the *Cabaret* ran every night. The show changed its title and much of its content each month. Alan Brunton's chronology of Red Mole work lists six separate shows between March and October 1977: *Courtney Graffiti*, *Back to the Fifties*, *Stairway to the Stars*, *The A&P Show*, *The Sixties aka Holyoake's Children*, and *The Arabian Nights*.¹ Also listed is an evening of Italian futurist plays and a reprise show called *Red Mole's Golden Hits*. It was an impressive turnover, even given the fact that each show was structured around certain regular items. The *Cabaret* allowed Red Mole's anarchist principles – whoever wanted to join, could join – to operate in practice. As Martin Edmond says in *Zucchini Roma*: ‘They would use anybody who wanted to be involved . . . There was . . . a willingness to include disparate elements.’² The list of participating performers in the *Cabaret* runs to 47, including such luminaries as Andy Anderson, Beaver, Cathy Downes, Susan Wilson, Rick Bryant, Mary-Jane O'Reilly, Bill Stalker (who was an important regular performer in the *Cabaret*) and Carmen herself. A significant Red Mole performer who made his first appearance for Red Mole at the *Cabaret* was Ian Prior. Prior did not go north to Auckland with Red Mole in October. His next appearance with the Moles was in *Ghost Rite* at the beginning of 1978. But from then on he was a crucial member of the company, especially in America.³ Alan Brunton commented in *Zucchini Roma* that ‘the history of Red Mole has been a history of bright moments,’ and a number of bright moments from the cabarets stay with me. I remember Arthur Baysting as Neville Purvis, utterly deadpan, recounting the tale of the winner of the silver plough contest. As the winner drove home, up the Foxton Straight, in his Zephyr, ‘his mind must still have been on ploughing that straight furrow’ – and here Neville inserted the only movement, in his stand-up comic talk – his right hand went forward to grasp the imagined steering wheel while he turned his

¹ Over the summer of 1994-95, I attempted to construct a chronology of Red Mole's work. When I presented my list to Alan Brunton, the shortcomings of my effort prompted him to sit down and produce the definitive document – which came back as a 23-page list and the comment, ‘Three days work that almost cost me my eyesight.’ This list is more or less reproduced as Appendix A of my thesis, ‘Old Comrades of the Future: A History of Experimental Theatre in New Zealand 1962-1982,’ 474-95. See also online version at

http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/brunton/brief/mole_chron.asp

² When I interviewed Sally Rodwell she made a point of drawing a distinction between the way Red Mole and Living Theatre had worked and the way Theatre Action had worked: ‘Red Mole never auditioned – it has always had the same openness Living Theatre had. Anyone who wanted to join, could join.’ Sally Rodwell, personal interview, Island Bay, Wellington, 18 Nov 1994.

³ Less crucially, I was a juggler in *The A&P Show*.

left arm, shoulder and his head to look behind him at the disappearing road, in his mind, the straight furrow. The head-on collision did not have to be mimed or named to be imagined by the audience: 'He had ploughed his last furrow.' The bathetic absurdity and sentimental poignancy of this image of a modern rural death was enhanced by the teller himself, Neville Purvis, a weedy, urban spiv in white suit, white hat, white shoes and mirror shades, who hailed from Lower Hutt. Neville Purvis tried to have a life outside Red Mole and even went on to his own television show. But he never gained the kind of life that Billy T. James or John Clarke's Fred Dagg achieved. Neville Purvis's finest moments were within the confines of Red Mole. Baysting was also a poet and editor of the 1973 anthology, *The Young New Zealand Poets*. After Red Mole he ceased to write poetry: 'I became a songwriter. I was a poet, but I haven't been since Red Mole.' (Baysting, video interview)

Another invention in *The A&P Show* was a reconstruction/deconstruction of Frank Sargeson's story 'An Affair of the Heart.' Red Mole sought out Gothic aspects of the story. They staged it with bare simplicity but were careful to add a Zephyr Six, something not present in the original. The last sketch in Brunton's *A Red Mole Sketchbook* (1989b), 'The Name of the Place is Called Succoth,'⁴ draws heavily on the same rural Gothic which runs through New Zealand culture from the black farce of Ronald Hugh Morrieson's novels to Vincent Ward's symbol-laden film *Vigil*.

One of my most vivid memories of the *Cabaret* is of the 'Dead on Road' skit. Eating 'dead on road' (presented in the skit as a suggestion from *The Whole Earth Catalogue*) meant living off possums, hedgehogs, birds etc. killed by passing cars. The skit focused on a group of commune hippies eking out a dead-on-road existence. When, lo, one day, a great manna of carrots fell from the sky. Amazed at this response to their mantra-chanting, the hippies hoed into the miraculous feast – until someone arrived who told them about the recent helicopter drops of poison to kill the possums. . . The hippies' last moments were spent wondering what kind of hallucinogenic visions the ten-eighty poison would deliver along with death. Each of the above 'bright moments' is notable for its topicality and mordant Kiwi flavour.

The impact of *Cabaret Capital Strut* is clearly demonstrated by the critical response. From the perspective of 1992, Lawrence MacDonald retained the freshness of his experience:

⁴ It was in fact written in 1976 'for a variety show that Warren Cowie got together at Wellington High School.' (Brunton 1989b, 84)

Some evenings last beyond their initial impact and remain with you, joining a small group of touchstones in a personal pantheon of theatrical highpoints which attempt to push beyond the currently accepted limits of theatre. For me the opening night of *The Cabaret Capital Strut* [. . .] is one such occasion. (MacDonald 11)

Writing at the time, Adrian Kiernander records the same sense of excitement:

[T]he *Cabaret Capital Strut*, six completely original and popular shows in seven months, culminating in *Stairway to the Stars* [. . .] was sold out every night with long queues down Victoria Street and many people turned away. The shows matured as the performers rapidly gained in experience and success made more lavish sets and costumes possible. (Kiernander 1977, 47)

Mike Nicolaidi commented in *The Evening Post*:

Playing Friday through Sundays, Red Mole Enterprises offer their own rough edged brand of cabaret with an unnerving casualness that belies both its impact and its craft. (Quoted in 'More About Your Mole' 11)

The question arises: was *Cabaret Capital Strut* the high point of Red Mole's work, a benchmark they never again attained? Lawrence MacDonald calls the *Cabaret*, along with *Ghost Rite*, 'their most spectacular and visible NZ achievements.' (MacDonald 9) The *Cabaret* launched Red Mole into national consciousness. It defined the shape of their work to come for a long time. And when it was over, there began the vagabond existence which was to characterise their next decade. Just at the height of their success, Red Mole disbanded *Cabaret Capital Strut* and moved to Auckland. Though Carmen had lost her lease on The Balcony, there was no need for the move to Auckland in October. Despite two major tours, Red Mole was at home in Wellington and the *Cabaret* was a truly local phenomenon, belonging to that inner city Wellington night life that had also nurtured Downstage. Red Mole records that 'Michael Fowler offers to find new space [but] the troupe is tempted to Auckland by Phil Warren.' (Brunton 1989c) That move proved to be a step across a line of no return. A peripatetic restlessness would send them, during the next decade, from Auckland back to Wellington, then on a national tour, virtually living in a van before

heading for Mexico, then New York, then England, then back to New York, then across America and back to New Zealand, then back to New York, then to New Mexico, then back to New York, then New Mexico and Amsterdam, before returning to the original base of Wellington in 1988.

Red Mole's own publicity, in line with Ian Fraser's general assessment, cited European avant-garde antecedents and ancestors for their *Cabaret*: 'French and German Cabaret traditions and the works of the Dadaists, André Breton, Brecht, Valentin and Karl Kraus were major influences on Red Mole.' ('Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players') This was no mere empty advertising roll call. Brunton particularly was very knowledgeable about the workings and products of the European avant-garde. The Futurist plays put on at the *Cabaret* included works by Francesco Cangiullo, Bruno Corra, Emelio Settimelli, Guglielmo Jannelli and Luciano Nicastro. Part of *Cabaret Capital Strut* was always a self-conscious re-creation of and homage to past forms of radical and satirical theatre.

In fact 'cabaret' as a revived form captured a new audience and international popularity in the late 1970s. This was only partly due to the film and musical *Cabaret* (1972) which also drew on the romance of Weimar Berlin and *die Neuesachlichkeit* (literally the 'New Matter-of-a-Factness'). On the world theatre circuit, Lindsay Kemp's camp, grotesque art cabarets were popular festival fare, but one does not need to go further than across the Tasman to Sydney to find Johnny Allen and others putting on something remarkably similar to *Cabaret Capital Strut*:

Cabaret Conspiracy began with one of those fortunate street corner encounters. I had been running the Paris Theatre in Sydney as a multi-media community access theatre through 1976 and 1977, and was going through a period of licking my wounds and counting my losses. On the corner of Oxford Street outside the then dead theatre, I bumped into Fifi L'Amour and Michael Murray, both of whom had been involved with cabaret groups performing at the Paris [. . .] So was born instant cabaret for the instant cafe society of Darlinghurst. [. . .] By five to eight the place is packed. The debris of Sydney society cram in. There are punks and spunks, hippies, has-beens, drag-queens, surfies, trendies, transvestites [. . .] There are mothers and kids and ordinary people as well [. . .] People would come one week and mutter to themselves, 'I

could get up on stage and do as well as that' – and come back next week with an act of their own. (Allen 53-54)

The parallel with Red Mole is striking.

Phil Warren invited Red Mole to Auckland to his Ace of Clubs venue on the basis of their success at The Balcony. The show presented at the Ace of Clubs was another cabaret, called *Slaughter on Cockroach Avenue*, but this cabaret introduced an overall, though not entirely coherent, film-noirish narrative featuring a private eye called Frank Libra; along with items from the new Auckland dance company, Limbs. Red Mole played their month's contract at the Ace of Clubs in November 1977, then moved on, before Christmas, to present another cabaret show, *Pacific Nights*, at another venue, The Sweet Factory (the old Hudson's factory) in Parnell. Important additions to the company included Joe Bleakley as a designer (he had already begun working with the Moles at Carmen's), and Jean McAllister as a singer and musician. The Country Flyers continued to play and Jan Preston, long time the heart of Red Mole's music-making, continued to provide musical direction. At this point Red Mole consisted of a range of skills and strengths in writing, performing, music and design. The key members were Arthur Baysting, Alan Brunton, Joe Bleakley, John Davies, Martin Edmond, Deborah Hunt, Jean McAllister, Jan Preston and Sally Rodwell. There was a feeling of confidence combined with an impressive ability to create and perform new work quickly.

But, once in Auckland, cabaret as such began to lose its fascination. Red Mole did not want to be cabaret artists for life. Sally Rodwell noted that they were all 'tired of cabaret.' (Brunton and Rodwell interview) Red Mole wanted more and they had a new strength and confidence to go and get it. They sought to create a new kind of theatre, one which was intimately associated with a new vision of society, one in which the theatrical community of Red Mole was to be a cell of the new entity. Even more than most experimental companies, Red Mole is best known for its company name rather than any particular show. *Zucchini Roma* reinforces this by basing the narrative of the film around company members ('those who still live outside the law') and almost ignoring particular creations. It was as publicity for their next show, *Ghost Rite*, that Red Mole first used the messianic phrase 'Some day all theatre will be like this' as a banner publicity headline proclaiming their transforming theatricality. They

continued to use this catch phrase for several years. The phrase has a wonderfully paradoxical life in that it is both hopelessly grandiose and yet teasingly prophetic – what if they are right, what if this is the theatre of the future? The wild claim, in the finest avant-garde traditions, is designed to get up the noses of the middle-of-the-road theatre world, as it did with *Act* reviewer Laurie Atkinson. He took particular exception to the idea that Red Mole should be able to pronounce in this way. He kicked off his complaint by quoting from two old actors in a Pinero comedy:

– And so this new-fangled stuff, and these dandified people, are to push us, and such as us, from our stools!

– Yes, James, just as some other new fashion will, in course of time, push them from their stools. (Atkinson 15)

Atkinson follows up this world-weary synopsis of change as an inevitable cycle of repetition by writing: ‘Oh dear! I must be getting old [. . .] for I find it increasingly hard to tolerate the sweeping generalisations of the young (and not-so-young) when it comes to what theatre is.’ This was qualified by protestations: ‘I attended and thoroughly enjoyed *Ghost Rite*.’ And rounded out by an appeal for the ‘variety’ of theatre:

From Brecht and Shaw at their polemic best to Beckett at his most austere, from the slapstick of Punch and Judy, to the colour and excitement of an American musical, from the hilarity of farce to the sheer joyous fun of the verbal gymnastics of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*. Variety is the essence of theatre, as it is of life. (Atkinson 15)

A clichéd moralising reaction such as this must have delighted the provocational spirits of Red Mole.

So, out of the epic year of cabaret *Ghost Rite* was born. The essence of the change of direction that *Ghost Rite* heralded was the decision to mount a big and complex show with a long period of rehearsal. As *Capital Strut* begat a genealogy of cabarets, so *Ghost Rite* was the primogenitor of a whole family of ‘big shows’ – *Goin' to Djibouti*, *The Last Days of Mankind*, *Numbered Days in Paradise*, *Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players* and *I'll Never Dance Down Bugis St Again* – realised between 1978 and 1980. *Ghost Rite* was the most elaborate and the most carefully prepared of

these big shows. If, in the history of Red Mole, the period from 1974 to 1977 culminates in the *Cabaret* at The Balcony, then there is a reverse process with the big shows, a culmination at the beginning, and *Ghost Rite* lingers (like a ghost!) as a source and resource for the shows which follow it.

Ghost Rite was only performed six times, twice at the Maidment in Auckland and twice at the Opera House in Wellington, with a single performance at the Founders Theatre in Hamilton and the Opera House in Palmerston North, all in March 1978.⁵ In these performances *Ghost Rite* constituted the second half of a very long show. Perhaps Red Mole were nervous about abandoning their cabaret formula totally and so the first half was a kind of ‘cabaret insurance policy’ taken out against the big show second half failing. The first half was an odd amalgam of magician and escapologist Jon Zealando, Arthur Baysting (who did not appear in *Ghost Rite* – nor ever again with Red Mole) as M.C. Neville Purvis, and Beaver with Midge Marsden and the Country Flyers playing a set. The music for *Ghost Rite* itself was composed by Jan Preston and played by her with a band calling itself The Methylated Spirits, consisting of Spencer Probert, Tony McMaster, Wayne Laird and Edwina Thorne.

Ghost Rite is probably best described as ‘by Alan Brunton and the Ensemble.’ The question of authorship in relation to Red Mole’s work is complex. From 1978 onwards Brunton's own chronology of the company designates himself as having written ‘the script’ for a number of shows such as *Ghost Rite* (1978), *Double Feature: Our World / Crazy in the Streets* (also 1978; *Crazy in the Streets* was published under Brunton’s name in *Landfall* 180 in 1991), *Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players* (1980), and *The Excursion* (1982) while others such as *Hard Luck Harold Bigsby* (1978) and *Electric Eyeland* (1980) and the film *Second Sight* (1981) are ascribed to Sally Rodwell and Deborah Hunt. Still others are listed as by The Ensemble. One needs to try and distinguish among such terms as ‘idea (for a show),’ ‘scenario,’ ‘script,’ and ‘method of development,’ although none of this may matter: the title *Ghost Rite* is a joke on the idea of authorship. In the case of *Ghost Rite*, there are two manuscripts in existence. The first, which is dated 1978, is 16 pages long, consisting of a prologue and nine acts with three songs and two large monologues written out in full and some suggested lines of dialogue for some of the acts, but the writing is principally made up of broad stage instructions and descriptions. The second script is a rewrite done in

⁵ ‘I don’t believe *Ghost Rite* played P.N. in the end.’ Martin Edmond, personal email, 8 Feb 1998. *Ghost Rite* may have played only five times.

1989 (dated 1978/1989) which is 44 pages long, consisting of a prologue, seven acts and an epilogue with a much fuller and more conventional use of stage instructions and dialogue. The first, written before the production, was obviously expanded by the company, while the second version is probably a mixture of the performance itself and Brunton's interpolations and improvements eleven years later (he was a tireless re-writer of his poetry). Rodwell observed in 1994 that up until *Dreamings End* (1984) no Red Mole script was entirely authored by Brunton. (Brunton and Rodwell interview)

Ghost Rite was the story of the history of the world, indeed, the universe. It was therefore a story which could only be told by raising the dead, the ghosts, and parading them through the past in a rite of passage. In as much as such a story has been told already (is history), any telling of it must be a 'ghost writing' on behalf of the dead. The tale was told in a series of theatrical tropes which picked out moments along a chronological line (eternity versus the instant). Here was another 'collection of bright moments,' except that the intensity of some of the moments was not 'bright' but dark. A feeling of apocalyptic finality brooded over them.

However the story did end with a particularly bright moment, the departure of 'The Fool' on 'the Liberty Bus,' a tinny old crate of an aeroplane: 'let's move to another place' they sang as the Fool left, perhaps with their minds on another universe, or at least New York (Brunton 1978, 15,16). In *Ghost Rite* this plane was contrived out of a cart (created by Joe Bleakley and Russell Collins whose grandiose designs were important for *Ghost Rite*⁶) which had been a major feature in several earlier scenes:

⁶ 'Speaking of *Ghost Rite*, no account of it is complete without mention of the Wheel. This had been custom-machined, at great expense, somewhere on the North Shore and was a double-rimmed tubular aluminium wheel large enough for a person to stand braced inside of [. . .] between each section of the drama, this wheel, with someone spreadeagled in it, passed from one side of the stage to the other. It was a hellish thing to ride, especially on a raked stage: you couldn't afford to get the trajectory wrong. [. . .] That it never ran away into the audience is one of the wonders of that short tour. A compelling image though. Joe's offsideer then and later was a guy called Russell Collins [. . .] They got way out of control on *Ghost Rite*. The opening inflatables were fantastic and beautiful; the cart, far too elaborate and unwieldy for its purpose; the third major piece was a set of open metal cubes, about nine or ten, which were meant to be able to be broken down and reset in different combinations. These things were made out of welded steel, too heavy to do anything much with, beyond lugging them on and off stage. At one of the Maidment shows, making a quick change 'in the wings' (ie on the side that has no wing) I bent over to do up my shoe and bashed my head on one of these cubes, which was concealed behind the blacks [. . .] did the final number, "Liberty Bus," where the whole cast blew fire, with blood streaming down my face from a gashed eyebrow [. . .] another compelling image.' Martin Edmond, 8 Feb 1998.

The Fool rushes in and tumbles onto the stage. Picking herself up, the Fool barks orders at the flag-wavers. They get together a rudimentary but marching platoon. The cart is pushed on. One of the platoon takes a beer can and uses it like a microphone. At his command, it seems, the cart is turned over. Its wheel now seems to be a propeller and the man with the can is readying it for take-off. A scarlet cloak is placed around the Fool and she is put into the cart, arms stretched out, legs bent. A cross is put on the cart, it is further decorated with flowers. As the music and words of 'Liberty Bus' rise, the actors become manic in their marching, the Fool flaps her arms hopefully. Count down begins. The actors strain higher and higher. A light floods stage and auditorium. Silence.

The curtain falls.

The curtain rises.

A group of actors sits on a cart. A strong actor is gathering baggage. They begin to push the cart out. They wave.

The curtain falls.

Liberty Bus

Good Morning Driver

Can I go home with you?

Yes, I am anxious

to catch that Liberty Bus –

no fighting and no fuss

on the Liberty Bus.

We can have a lot of fun

calling out to John Frum

rock this buggy

make it roll

echoes coming

from the lost patrol

five fingers this side of Hell

I can hear the liberty bell

no fighting and no fuss
when you're riding
the Liberty Bus

you can walk on the wires,
you can hang on a tree
but you can't cheat hope
on the Liberty Bus
now
now
now
let's move to another place
yes,
let's move
move
another place
on the Liberty Bus⁷
(Brunton 1978, 14-16)

This song, 'Liberty Bus,' which borrowed the tune of Bob Marley's 'Exodus' is a poetic vision of Red Mole's future – the exodus from New Zealand. The song was recycled as the ending for *Goin' to Djibouti* at His Majesty's in Auckland at the end of June 1978, Red Mole's last show in New Zealand before setting out for America. *Goin' to Djibouti* had a poster, designed by Barry Linton, which became an icon of Red Mole's identity during the period around the departure from New Zealand and the arrival in New York. The poster featured a desert landscape being crossed by a straggling band of entertainers – one bears a flag, another blows a trumpet, a third with rabbit-like ears hauls a cart with a cloth-covered roof from which a fish dangles. A figure crouches inside the cart while behind marches another figure in a long robe bearing an umbrella and in the foreground, at the rear of the party, we see the head and shoulders of someone wearing a top hat and a

⁷ Liberty Bus was a bus line in Sumatra that gave unforgettable trips from Prapat to Bukittinggi.' Alan Brunton, personal email, 21 Dec 1995.

fish mask who twists back to gape at us. Bleakley and Collins's cart was turned into a symbol.

There was a poetic and prophetic tone to *Ghost Rite* not present in Red Mole's work up to this time. In the programme of *Ghost Rite* Red Mole used a quotation from the Dadaist Hugo Ball which focuses attention on New Zealand as an image of paradise (under threat): 'Somewhere, perhaps, there is a little island in the South Pacific that is still untouched, that has not yet been invaded by our anxiety. How long could that last before that too could be a thing of the past.'⁸ Like 'some day all theatre will be like this,' the Ball quotation became a leitmotif attached to a lot of Red Mole publicity, especially in America. The twinned themes of 'paradise' and 'apocalypse' ghost these catch phrases. In *Spleen* Brunton had written a review of *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* in which he addressed these themes. He suggests that 'the myth of Eden is [. . .] a depressing one,' and puts in its place something 'few commentators have taken note of [. . .] the line of the apocalyptic.' (Brunton 1976, 17) In fact it is as part of apocalypse that Red Mole's image of paradise is constructed. The names of three major Red Mole shows from the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, *The Last Days of Mankind* (borrowed, with a nod, from Karl Kraus), *Numbered Days in Paradise* and *Dreamings End* give clues as to how paradise and apocalypse are united.⁹ Apocalypse is poised simultaneously at the point of collapse into total ruin and the revolutionary rebirth into a new (and better – perfect?) world. Apocalypse is the ideal phantasmagoria, the bright moment of simultaneously disappearing and re-forming, a magical act, a 'ghost rite.'

Though *Ghost Rite* was constructed of 'moments,' they were not a series of disparate items. The tone was coherent. The piece had long passages where there was little narrative movement, but each 'moment' (designated in its scripting by a separate 'Act') was part of the overall historical structure, which was never abandoned for the sake of a joke or a song or a circus interlude, as had been the case in the cabarets. This singularity of structure shifted the style of performance:

⁸ This quotation from Hugo Ball was also carried on the front cover of the pamphlet *Red Mole Enterprises* prepared under Nance Shatzkin's management for use on the 1980 tours of New Zealand and back in New York.

⁹ 'AB [Alan Brunton] was reading Karl Kraus in Wgtn in 1977 [. . .] I found a copy of *The Last Days of Mankind* in the public library and handed it to him.' Martin Edmond, 8 Feb 1998.

acting techniques have changed, one can't deny that. Indeed the whole concept of the actor's role has undergone a radical change. In the earlier *Ace Follies* each actor was called upon to display his/her particular skills in a number of carefully prepared situations. Improvisation played a big part, but that was as much a result of the inherent nature of those skills as any deliberate structuring of the performance. In *Ghost Rite* actors deliberately avoid using their previously developed skills. Familiar traits occasionally emerge but do not last, while even improvisation is given a new function. (Wilson 16)

This change provoked some anxiety in critics and raised the question of the 'quality' of the performers qua performers. Simon Wilson, in the review quoted above, goes on to say that 'rather than providing a vehicle for stylistic extension it [improvisation] simply introduces an element of aimlessness.' What could be forgotten in the rapidly passing parade of a cabaret, lingered and accumulated in the singular sweep of *Ghost Rite*. Adrian Kiernander commented:

One cannot help but be staggered at the richness of invention and imagination which has gone into the creation of this piece, and the energy, concentration and dedication which enable it to cohere so densely in performance.

But he goes on to say:

The major weakness at the moment is in precision of performance. The group has long outgrown the patronising epithet 'rough-hewn,' which often means little more than 'not very good yet'; and surrounded by the polish and professionalism evident in the ideas, in the dazzling props, costumes and masks, and in Jan Preston's superb music which contributed so much to the total effect, surrounded as I say by all this and the State Opera House too, any imprecision in execution or concept jars in a way it never used to in the Balcony or the Ace of Clubs. (Kiernander 1978, 16)

The history of the world was not a new subject for drama. The medieval guilds spent Corpus Christi dragging their carts from station to station to stage the world's story. The cart in *Ghost Rite* was not accidental. The New Zealand Living

Theatre Troupe had done the history of the world in five minutes in *The Race for Life* (1972), a piece in which Sally Rodwell had performed. Post *Ghost Rite*, Peter Brook took nine hours to extract a telling from the *Mahabharatta*. The moments *Ghost Rite* chose to show were all balanced at the point of catastrophe. There was an overwhelming sense of apocalypse throughout the piece, which was why it managed to combine religious and political themes: the end of the world *and* political revolution. It was permeated with dreams of hope and dreams of disaster. The figure of Hans Bones who emerges in Act Seven of the 1978 script (Act Six of the 1989) is a wild protestant doom-sayer who preaches the forbidden word of anarchy:

My name is Hans Bones and I have come to you from the House of Voluntary Poverty. I have been transmitted to Eternity. All things which have been created are held in common by all of us. Give. Give. Give. Give up your houses, lands, souvenirs, your hardware and your books. Have nothing left that is your property. All things are to be held in commonwealth.

Unfortunately Hans Bones becomes a tool of forces (the Prompter) who exploit his truth:

The Prompter is at the edge of the crowd picking pockets and sees the bottle too late – Hans drinks! Hans gets drunk and, as the people chant licentiously, he grabs the girl who has borne the drink and they copulate uproariously. Orgasm will burn up error. It won't be true unless it hurts. Hans comes out of his stupor. He knows what has happened. The Prompter screams while hitting him with the money-purse. He curses Hans for blowing the gig. The crowd leaps at the Prompter and tears him to pieces.

And, as Hans is treated by the crowd like another Christ, the scene ends on a cosmic note:

An actress leaps up and wipes his brow; then pricks his ears and collects tiny amounts of blood in small bottles. The crowd circles the stage aimlessly. We hear again Satan's voice and enter two lewd masked characters from Act

Three. The sun, at its zenith, is still accompanied by Sirius, the dog star. Hans is carried upstage.

A naked figure passes in a wheel.

The cry of Ra, the sun god, is heard. The chair bearing Hans Bones bursts into fire. The madness of the millennium cracks open. A shaft of light comes in from the flies and then rises again. (Brunton 1978, 9-11)

Though these stage instructions from the 1978 script seem to be beyond the limits of theatrical possibility, this was the performance text and they are all theatrically realisable. The 1989 rewrite goes further, the script sometimes sounding like a Jodorowsky film script:

Cannibal begins to climb up the mountain. The figures of the Ancestors are at the top. When Cannibal gets to the top, his soul screams and with his sword he attacks the sculptures. When the sculptures are enough hacked to holes, hundreds of birds fly out of them whistling in terror. A convention of panic and illusion. The drums and the viol cease. Only the birds are heard. Cannibal comes down the mountain and the mountain falls apart. (Brunton 1989a, 18)

This kind of dramatic writing recalls everything from Edward Gordon Craig's *übermarionette* visions to Artaud's *Le Jet de Sang*:

Two stars collide, and a succession of limbs of flesh fall. Then feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticoes, temples, and alembics, falling slower and slower as if through space, then three scorpions one after the other and finally a frog, and a scarab which lands with heart-breaking, nauseating slowness. (Artaud,18)

The writing calls for an apocalyptic theatricality which explodes the bounds of theatrical convention. The 1989 script also contains bathetic in-jokes such as when the Sclerotic Guru calls out 'Het fluffing . . . Het fluffing! Het fluffing!' (Brunton

1989a, 12) This is a line from a poem by Russell Haley¹⁰, ‘Solomon Rhatigan and the I Ching,’ which Brunton published in the first issue of *Freed* magazine in 1969. The 1989 script is more literary, the 1978 more theatrical, though both are unquestionably dramatic.

The two versions of *Ghost Rite* are similar, but the way they present their ideas can vary widely. For instance both Prologues give accounts of the formation of matter at the beginning of the universe. The performed version is a straightforward prose description (‘In the thin thing that was there at the beginning that was hydrogen and helium, galaxies are formed.’ (Brunton 1978, 1) This was realised on stage in the following way:

Overture led to the curtains drawing back to reveal a circle of low cylinders filled with clear plastic. Slowly these were pumped with air until they became a ring of quivering horns pointing toward the centre. It was superb. (Chunn 15)

The 1989 version turns this into a scene with five characters in a crazy laboratory and the description of the origin of the universe is put into the mouth of a decrepit, comedic Doctor. In a paradoxical way, the 1978 version, the performed version, is more poetic, the unperformed, although taking wild liberties with theatrical possibility, is more grounded in the conventions of dramatic text with characters, stage instructions and dialogue more clearly delineated. Two Acts that are omitted from the rewrite are an account of the origins and inheritance of the Egyptian god Osiris and a late medieval cum early renaissance theatricalisation of the dancing of the tarantala, an image of the failure of desire which recalls the early poetry of T.S. Eliot.

Both versions contain words for a song about anarchy. In the 1978 script, the song was sung by the Mountebanque in Act Five:

I have been gathering dust in mountains of ice
Halfway away from the dark side of paradise

¹⁰ ‘Het fluffing,’ a meaningless but potentially Freudian combination of Dutch and English, were words that Russell Haley says he found himself uttering as he woke from a dream. Personal telephone interview, 17 Nov 1995.

I went to see Jesus but the show was sold-out
Now the Devil makes me twist and shake and shout

Hey, lovely lady, you can't hold me
I'm on the road with anarchy
Let the pimps pull daisies
But don't you pray for me
'Cause I'm on the road with anarchy
(Brunton 1978, 6-7)

And so on for three more verses with chorus. Red Mole's anarchist stance on theatre and politics was now being articulated in the performance content. Not only was this done in the script of *Ghost Rite*, but also in the notes included in the elaborate programme. The quotation from Dadaist Hugo Ball about 'a little island in the South Pacific' prepared Red Mole for leaving home and heading toward apocalyptic New York – home was being prepared to become a prelapsarian paradise available for recovery in the future. The programme also quoted from Walter Benjamin, as Simon Wilson disapprovingly noted:

The show's concept of history is superficial, and displays no understanding of the actual forces which move history forward. This might not be so bad if Red Mole didn't claim otherwise. In their programme they quote Walter Benjamin on historical materialism: it 'wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.' (Wilson 16)

The cycles of repetition in Red Mole's view of history as it is articulated in *Ghost Rite* seem to relate precisely to this search for a 'moment of danger,' a point of apocalypse. Though there is nothing overtly local about the flora and fauna of *Ghost Rite*, it nevertheless insists on a sense of crisis which can readily be identified both with New Zealand society, and the feeling of entrapment of the Muldoon years. It was also in the *Ghost Rite* programme that the mythic history of the vision of *Cabaret Capital Strut* in Veint's Tearooms in Gore was first propagated. This was developed into a claim about the efficacy of the cabaret and

the indigenous character of the company. From Terry Snow's *Art New Zealand* feature on Red Mole:

The cabaret drew on all the experiences of theatre to present through mime, dance, spectacle and farce an exact measure of our country. Stated Alan Brunton: 'Our shows are as totally New Zealand as a can of Watties baked beans – we are homegrown theatre.' (Snow 30)

The fact that *Ghost Rite* contained nothing as specifically local as a can of baked beans was a deliberate part of Red Mole strategy. The boldness of the claims in the *Ghost Rite* Programme Note demonstrate the confidence, growing mythology, and sense of identity Red Mole had gained in their cabarets.

Critics responded to Red Mole's claims. In *Salient* Simon Wilson mounted an attack on their politics:

Ghost Rite attempts to move from moment to moment by magic, in reality it moves from theatrical effect to theatrical effect by device and never gets beyond that. It's art for art's sake, but it pretends to be more [. . .] We might have our imaginations extended by proxy, by observing the imagination of others, but we are given little to enable us to understand them and little that reveals the workings of the subjects which those imaginations are focused on. This is not historical materialism, this is bourgeois creativity. In this concentration on the aesthetic and in other respects Red Mole shares much in common with Downstage. Both groups are capable of producing exciting theatre (and *Ghost Rite* is exciting) for middle class audiences with money in their pockets and nothing else to set standards by. (Wilson 16)

Here we have a Marxist moralist wagging a finger at the obscurantism of the anarchist avant-garde. The jibe about Downstage was clearly calculated to hurt. What Wilson demanded, at the end of his extended review of *Ghost Rite* was 'a theatre which really does explore our history and provide a lead in its development,' though he conceded 'Red Mole are necessary to New Zealand theatre, if only because of the claims they make about themselves.' He recognised that the rhetoric of the programme was part of the show. As Red Mole's sense of mission and identity grew, so the 'show'

increasingly came to be happening twenty-four hours a day. The contrast here with any of the institutional theatres is at its most marked; in the institutional theatres, such as Downstage, any given play did not necessarily represent the views of anyone involved in the creation.

Ghost Rite takes its place in the history of Red Mole possessed of a power to be a resource for future work. But it was more than this. It was a kind of script for the company to live out. A world-wide scenario of apocalypse (New York) and paradise (an island in the South Pacific) was being constructed. *Ghost Rite* provided a map of bright (and dark!) moments of history to be lived out all over the planet in the next few years. *Ghost Rite* ghosted the future.

Red Mole's second show in New York was called *The Last Days of Mankind* (April 1979). In his introduction to his eponymous 800-page epic drama Karl Kraus wrote:

The performance of this drama, whose scope of time by earthly measure would comprise about ten evenings, is intended for a theater on Mars. Theatergoers in this world would not be able to endure it. For it is blood of their blood, and its contents are from those unreal, inconceivable years, those years that no waking consciousness can apprehend, that are inaccessible to any memory and preserved only in a gory dream, those years in which operetta figures enacted the tragedy of mankind. The action, leading into a hundred scenes and hells, is impossible, fissured, and hero-less, just as that other action was. (Kraus 3)

The 'action' Kraus refers to is the First World War and Austria's part in it. Kraus's text is imbued with a politics like Red Mole's (an anarchist pox on all your houses!) and brooded over by the sense of apocalypse which the title epitomises. This enormous literary drama (parts of it have been staged) presents a phantasmagoria of history which ends with 'a high pile of rotting unburied corpses' over which 'a flock of ravens swarms' (reminiscent of the bird masks and bird puppets which were a feature of Red Mole) and a passing troop of the ghosts of diseased whores, while the last speech is pronounced by a syphilitic unborn foetus: 'Lovingly that wretch, my father, / Handed down the clap to me.' (Kraus 234-37) Kraus's satirical vision is important to Brunton and the 1989 rewrite of

Ghost Rite has affinities with the text of Kraus's *Last Days*. These affinities must have reached the uncanny for Red Mole when, not long after they had arrived in New York, the nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island began to melt down. Red Mole's *Last Days of Mankind* did not end with a group of adventurous young Kiwis flying away on the Liberty Bus, as *Ghost Rite* had. A review of a performance given later in London in 1979 describes the last moments of *Last Days* as 'a man in white huddled by a telephone waiting for God to ring.' (Harding 28) The journey from Veint's tearooms in Gore had taken two and a half years.

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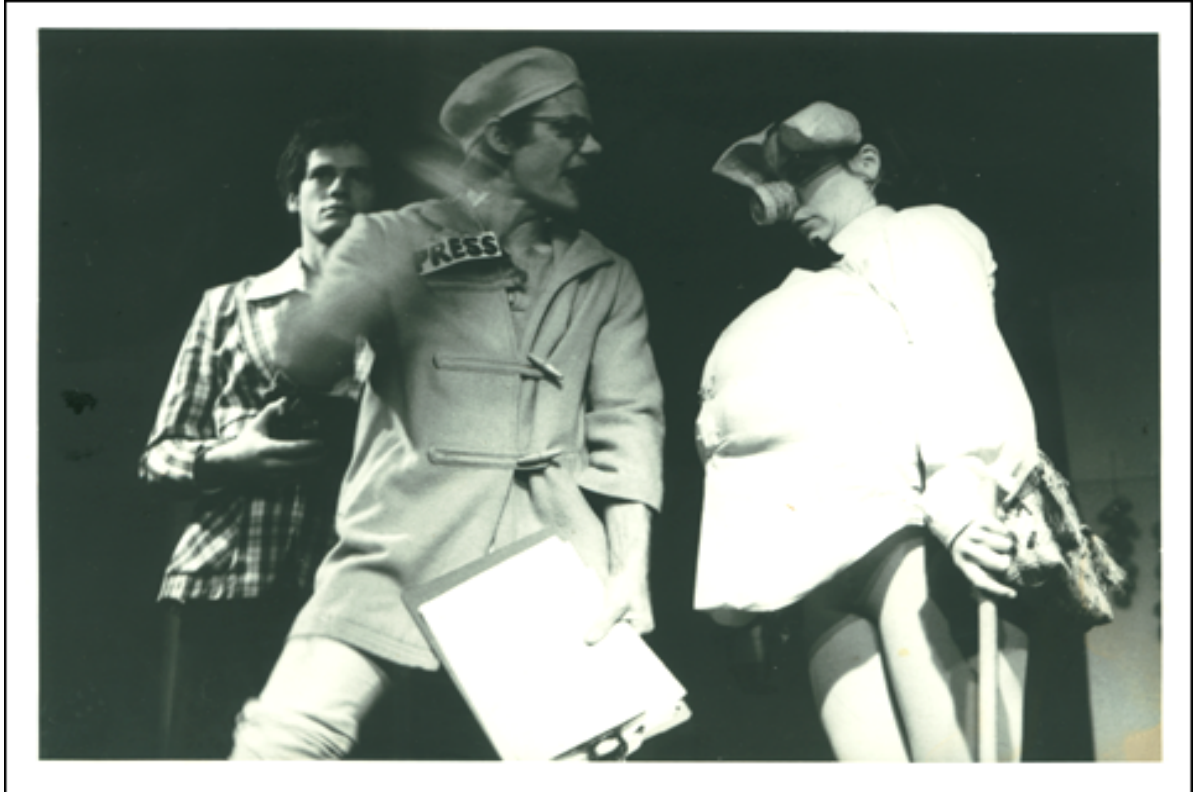
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Sally Rodwell, Deborah Hunt & Arthur Baysting backstage at Cabaret Capital Strut.



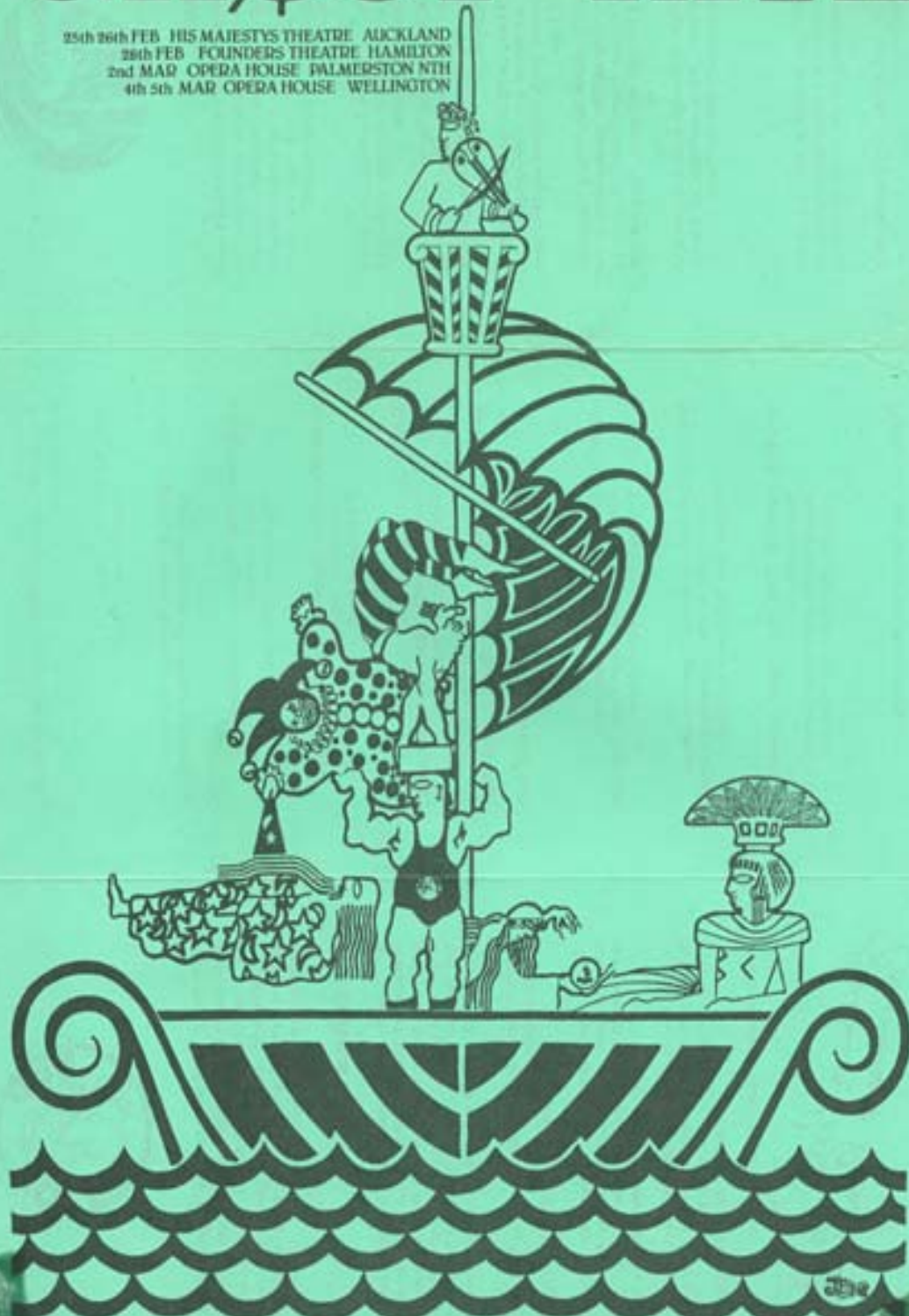
Deborah Hunt, Sally Rodwell & Arthur Baysting backstage at Cabaret Capital Strut.



Alan Brunton as 'Press' interviews 'Piggy' Muldoon, Prime Minister

GHØST RITE

25th 26th FEB HIS MAJESTYS THEATRE AUCKLAND
28th FEB FOUNDERS THEATRE HAMILTON
2nd MAR OPERA HOUSE PALMERSTON NTH
4th 5th MAR OPERA HOUSE WELLINGTON



RED MOLE BEAVER COUNTRY FLYERS & GUESTS



Alan Brunton & Deborah Hunt. Lost Egyptian scene from *Ghost Rite*



Alan Brunton, Ian Prior, Jean McAllister, Martin Edmond. *Ghost Rite*



Ghost Rite as theatre spectacle



Sally Rodwell, Alan Brunton, John Davies. *Ghost Rite*.



Ghost Rite