

THE BELLBIRD

A PLAY BY STEPHEN SINCLAIR



The writer, director, and producer

Specific learning outcomes

Students will:

- understand the process of developing this script.
- examine how a scene in the play has been developed by the director.
- understand the writer's purpose in developing this play.

[These learning outcomes relate to the Communication and Interpreting in Drama (CI) and Understanding Drama in Context (UC) strands in *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum*.]

History of the play

The Bellbird is set in Marlborough in the early 1870s. The idea for the play came from three letters Stephen Sinclair discovered while he was translating Māori manuscripts in the National Archives some years ago. The letters were in English, from a Pākehā woman who was writing to the Native Affairs Department appealing for assistance. The woman explained that she had been married to a Māori who had recently died. Her deceased husband's family wanted nothing to do with her, and as she had married a Māori she was not welcomed back into the local Pākehā community. She had no one else she could turn to for support.

The Bellbird, though based on a real-life situation, is fictional. The letters gave no information about the woman and her background, beyond the immediate urgency of her situation. The events in her life leading up to the letters, and all the other characters, are imaginary.

There is extensive use of Māori throughout the play, however nothing of significance is conveyed in Māori that is not also either expressed in English or communicated non-verbally through the actions of the actors.

Interview with the writer: Stephen Sinclair

Stephen Sinclair is one of New Zealand's most successful playwrights and screenwriters. His play *Ladies Night*, co-written with Anthony McCarten, continues to be performed internationally. His other plays include *Caramel Cream*, *Blowing It*, and *Braindead*.

Stephen has had a long screenwriting partnership with Academy Award nominees Peter Jackson and Frances Walsh (*Heavenly Creatures*, *The Frighteners*). In 1990 he co-scripted the feature film *Meet The Feebles* and in 1991 *Braindead*, which subsequently won Best Screenplay at the 1993 New Zealand Film and Television Awards. He also worked with Fran and Peter on the scripts for the three-feature film adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*.

Where did the story idea come from?

I found the letters on which the play is based when I was working in the National Archives in 1983. They haunted me for a long time and I wanted to develop them into a drama. It was about 10 years before I started turning the letters into a play.

How was the script developed?

The Bellbird went through several drafts but never got picked up seriously by a theatre developer or a theatre company. I kept working on it and working on it, because I am quite stubborn. I thought the script was destined to get relegated to the bottom drawer, when one day, completely out of the blue Oliver Driver rang me up and said he was interested in developing the script through the Auckland Theatre Company's 2econd Unit literary programme. We then went through a workshop of the script and a public play reading. The script was worked with a cast and director, and then read by the actors in front of an audience. From there we had more workshops and more revisions, then more workshops and redrafts.

The whole process of working with ATC [Auckland Theatre Company] has taken over a year and a lot of time and work has gone into revising and refining the script. Over the years I think there have probably been between 15 and 20 drafts. Scripts can sometimes be really quick to write, or sometimes they can take forever. Because of the scope of the play, I think it has taken a lot of time and effort to get it right.

How has the play changed?

There have been some major changes over the years. One of the key changes is the introduction of Api as a character. In the very first drafts, which were written in dramatic verse, the cast was all women. They would talk about Api but he was never actually on stage. Eventually the play has shifted to focus much more on the love story of Flo and Api. Their relationship has been developed and has become the pivot of the story.

Working with Oliver and the actors has seen the fleshing out of a lot of characters. Some changes to the text have made characters, especially Mrs Harrington and Aoraki, more developed and well rounded.

What is it like being able to see the process your play goes through to get put on stage?

It is very unusual for a writer to be part of the production process – normally you write a script and then you have to hand it over and you have very little say in how the play is put on. The process working with ATC has been very different. We have supported each other in the writing process and in the production process.

Sitting in on rehearsals is great – I was still rewriting during the rehearsals because often deficiencies in the story were revealed that didn't show up in the writing and workshop process.

*How is *The Bellbird* different from other New Zealand plays of its kind?*

I think this play is different primarily because it is by a Pākehā playwright. It is important for me not to get intimidated or defensive, and to focus on the play. I have tried to see all sides and treat everything with equal importance. I have tried to take into account the viewpoint of all of the characters. In some ways I have found the Pākehā characters harder to identify with. Personally I feel I can connect more with Māori society than I can with the Pākehā society of the time.

I also think this play is unique in how important the subtext is. There is so much underlying meaning. This meaning is enhanced by the body language and the emotion of the actors on stage. *The Bellbird* is full of moments when things are left unsaid or when people are talking about superficial things but there is really a deeper, hidden meaning to what they are saying.

What do you think of the set and costumes?

The script demands quite a lot of the set. The set has to be flexible enough to represent a lot of different places, including Mrs Harrington's house and the marae. I am really impressed with the spatial quality of the set. It really reflects the open space and large distances of the play's setting. Elizabeth has done an amazing job with the costumes.

Why did you decide to use English and Māori in the way that you did?

The transition between English and Māori is an interesting convention in the play. It reflects Flo's experience. It's like a curtain opening. When Flo becomes fluent in Māori, Māori ceases to be used. When Māori is used it's always handled in a way that people can still understand what is happening even if they can't speak it.

Why did you include so much music and singing?

Music has always been a significant part of my writing. It is an important part of this play, and it's also an important part of Māori tradition and of Pākehā society at the time.

What advice would you give a young playwright?

I guess if I had advice for a new writer I would recommend workshopping new work. It is important not to be defensive. Workshopping with a director and actors is really beneficial. It helps to work with good actors – and it's advisable to listen to their input because they often notice things about a character that you cannot.

Interview with the director: Oliver Driver

Why did you want to direct this play?

It's a new New Zealand work. I think it is important to programme New Zealand work. *The Bellbird* has been one of the founding scripts of the Second Unit Literary programme that operates here at ATC – and it has been great to see it go through the process of development.

What I think is great about this play is the large scale of the story. It's unusual to have a New Zealand writer think big and have a big vision – writing an epic play like this one can be scary. To me, this play has the scale of a play by Miller or by Shakespeare – it's a story on a big scale.

What I also think is great about it is that it's not about land or about how bad Pākehā people are, or how bad Māori people are – it is a love story. There are no villains but it ends in tragedy, as the love is never fully accepted. It's a love story that can be told in any country, a story that any country could understand.

What has been the biggest challenge?

There are always new challenges; the challenges never stop. When I directed *The Vagina Monologues* earlier this year, I was viewed as the boy who was directing the ultimate female play. This time around I am the white boy who is directing the bicultural play.

I have to rely on the cast to help me out and to make sure I am handling the content of the play as I should. The great thing is that with both shows the cast never treated me as an outsider. My job is not to get too caught up in worrying about how people might view my role and instead to focus on telling the story of the play. You can't be too scared.

What has been the best thing?

The actors. Working with the cast has been amazing. We are all working towards a great production. On the journey everyone has lost his or her ego and now we all have ownership over this great play. The other thing is that this is the first time I have been working with my peers. Most of the cast and crew, and the designers, are around my age – it's great to be able to work with people of my generation and be part of a team of new theatre makers.

How has it been to work with Stephen?

Stephen has been very trusting and has let us help him shape and build the script. I think he has been able to learn a lot about the creation of plays, and we have learnt about the world of the writer. Stephen has been incredibly instrumental in the development of ATC's literary programme and the process we have gone through with *The Bellbird* will serve as a template for future work.

How did you cast the production?

I have worked with Danielle before and I know how hard-working and talented she is, so I jumped at the chance to cast her.

Through the development process we went through several Mrs Harringtons – Elizabeth brings a wealth of experience to the part and she is a real asset in the rehearsal room. She feeds into the process offering all of her skill and knowledge.

Kayte and Tearepa had worked on the play from the very beginning of development and they showed such passion and commitment that I couldn't imagine casting anyone else.

Helen – who plays Elsie – is the most inexperienced of the cast, but that is one of the reasons why she is so perfect. She brings youth and innocence to the character automatically. I think it has also been great to give her the opportunity to learn from the rest of the cast.

Rachel is a fellow actor/director and I have always wanted to work with her, and had continued to look for an opportunity to make that possible. She does a terrific job. I am aware of very few old Māori actors and I knew she could do it and despite her youth she brings a mana to the stage that is incredible.

From the producer: Simon Prast

I believe that as one of New Zealand's largest theatre companies, the Auckland Theatre Company has an obligation to nurture, support, and present new work by local playwrights. The stories they tell are "of, by and for New Zealanders" and reveal so much about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going as a nation made up of many peoples. Besides this somewhat noble motive, they are for the most part "bloody good" stories and highly engaging theatre pieces.

Stephen Sinclair is one of this country's most significant playwrights. *Ladies Night*, which he co-authored with Anthony McCarten, is perhaps the most-seen play to emerge from this country. *The Bellbird*, though a very different play, is clearly the work of someone who knows how to write for the theatre. It's a love story, a costume epic, a history play and finally, a full-blown tragedy of near-Shakespearean proportions. Its characters are richly drawn, and its structure is taut and well defined.

This is partly the result of the extensive workshopping the play received through the Second Unit literary programme. *The Bellbird* was the very first play to be presented in this programme. Coincidentally, we read it on Waitangi Day 2001. At the reading, the play's potency was quickly revealed. The audience laughed at the antics at the beginning, became very quiet as the story kicked in and then wept openly as tragedy overtook the play's hero and heroine. All of this was music to a producer's ears. That it was in response to a new New Zealand play was so exciting. From that moment, we all knew this was a work that had to be seen. Oliver assembled an extraordinary cast and crew to realise Stephen's play. I am proud to be associated with the production.

The writer, producer, and director: classroom activities

Classroom activities have been developed specifically for



Working on with a class prior to viewing the play



Working with a class after viewing the play



Associated activities using resource material generated by the play



Meet the writer

Read the interview with playwright Stephen Sinclair.

List the steps he took to develop this script.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

What was his main motivation for writing this play?

Exploring a scene

Read the "Outside dinner scene" closely.

Identify the elements Stephen Sinclair has used in this scene in the table below.

Elements	Examples from the scene
Role (who)	
Time (when)	
Space (where)	
Action (what happens)	
Tension (what is the problem)	
Focus (what is the purpose of the scene)	

Annotate the scene as if you were the director. Paste a copy of the scene into your journal on a left hand page and make your notes on the right hand page. Mark in how you would want the actors to play the scene in terms of use of voice, facial expression, gesture and movement.

Sketch the space that you would use and note the main movement patterns that the characters would follow.

You may want to try directing your classmates for the scene.

Compare your interpretation of the scene to that in the Auckland Theatre Company's production.



Thinking critically about the script

Stephen Sinclair tells about the changes that he made to the script during the workshopping process.

The main changes were:

- In the first draft there was no Api character. It was an all female cast about a woman who was destitute after having married a Māori man. It was rewritten to include Api and became a love story
- Mrs Harrington and Aoraki changed from flat characters to more important characters that influence events in the play.
- Flo was re-written to make more active choices for herself when she joins Api's family.

Questions to answer:

1. How successful do you think these changes were? Were they necessary to the meaning of the play?
2. Which scenes did you think were the best? Why?
3. Were there any scenes that you did not enjoy? What was wrong? Would you direct the scene differently?
4. How did the setting of the 1870s feel to you? Was it more difficult to watch than a modern play?
5. Do you think that Stephen Sinclair should have chosen a modern story to portray his ideas?
6. What are the advantages of using the context of a past time?
7. What other changes would you make if this script was still being developed?

Write your own play

Each year Playmarket offer young writers the chance to send in a script to the 6th New Zealand Young Playwrights' Competition. This is a chance to have your own or your class work read and performed. If you are between the ages of 16 and 22 you can enter up to three plays in the competition. Plays can be 30 to 60 minutes in length with a cast of up to 15. Entry is free but you need to fill in an entry form. You can get a form from Mark Amery at scripts@playmarket.org.nz or by ringing Playmarket on 04 382 8462.

A winner and a runner-up are chosen from each of the following three regions: Northern (Cape Reinga to Taupo), Central (South of Taupo to Wellington, including the Chatham Islands), and Southern (The South Island and Stewart Island).

The three winners and three runners up are invited to attend an all expenses paid five-day event in Christchurch. During the five days the six plays are workshopped by professional directors and actors.

Outside dinner scene

(excerpt from *The Bellbird* by Stephen Sinclair)

A bell gongs.

FLO Oh - that's the dinner bell. I best go in...

API *Darkly.* I must stay outside. The others want me to eat on the ground like a dog. Pokokohua! I have more mana in my little finger than all of them...

FLO I tell you what, I'll eat out here with you. We can dine in the Italian way - al fresco. I'll go and get our plates.

Exit FLO.

API puts on his shirt.

Enter FLO with plates.

FLO Here we are. This is much nicer than the smelly old kitchen.

API Wait.

Api sets up two logs of wood for chairs.

FLO Oh, that's a clever idea Api.

API And a table - see?

He starts to move a big stump to use as a table.

FLO That's alright Api, don't bother with that we can eat on our laps.

API suddenly drops the stump and leaps back.

FLO What is it?

API is wide-eyed, pointing at something on the ground.

API He karara!

FLO What is it? I don't see anything.

API He karara!

FLO Oh... its just a lizard. Api, where are you going?

API has started to back offstage. He is terrified.

FLO You can't be frightened of a little lizard.

API A bad sign. We cannot eat here.

FLO Puts plates on stump. You are being ridiculous. This is just silly superstition.

API We eat around the front, ne? In the front yard. It is much nicer.

FLO What, in full view of the road? Api, pull yourself together.

API I not hungry.

FLO Yes you are. And you are going to sit down and eat your dinner here with me. Now.

FLO is about to sit on a log.

API E hara!

FLO What is it now?

API You must not... touch! That... there... it is tapu!

FLO Api...

API No! Whakarongo... listen... If you touch, the evil spirit enters you.. You must stay... away. When the tohuka come.. kia whakanoatia... to lift the tapu... only then is it safe...

FLO Well, I don't believe we have a witchdoctor on the staff, so what do you suggest?

API We sit over here, ne? On the ground. It is soft.

FLO *Sighs in exasperation.* Anything to make you happy.

FLO hands him a plate. API keeps glancing over to where he saw the lizard. Api performs a short tohi - a purification rite.

API Whakapaikia enei kai.. whakamoua kia tina, hui-e, taiki-e. *He sees FLO looking at him curiously.* Just to make it safe ne? To eat.

FLO Api its no good to be prey to these superstitions. *Recites grace:* For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful, Amen.

API Amene.