

## **ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL *PHOTO FINISH* INTO THE PLAY *SNAP!* Fiona Farrell, M Phil, ONZM**

September 15, 2013

There is the book, the novel – and in a week's time there will be the play that is based upon the book. And tonight I'm going to talk about the process by which one became the other.

The book is *Photo Finish*. It was Ngaio Marsh's 31<sup>st</sup> novel, her penultimate, written in 1980, two years before her death. It features, as do all her novels, beginning with *A Man Lay Dead*, published in 1934, the supremely elegant and intelligent Detective Inspector Roderick Alleyn. It is one of the four novels in which he pays a visit to New Zealand.

He is here on holiday, planning a little light fly fishing while his wife Agatha Troy, paints the portrait of the world's greatest operatic soprano Isabella Pepitone, La Sommita. They are guests of La Sommita's companion, the extraordinarily wealthy Montague V. Reece, who has brought her to a remote but very luxurious high country lodge in order that she might avoid the attentions of a persistent stalker, Strix, a fully paid up member of the paparazzi whose speciality has become taking unflattering shots of the diva when she least expects it, then selling them on to magazines and newspapers around the world.

His most recent attack – for they are attacks, designed to ridicule her publically – has been after a performance in Melbourne which has so upset her that her entourage – Reece and her manager Ben Ruby – deem it wise to beat a retreat, to take her somewhere peaceful. Reece happens to own a lodge on Lake Waihoe in the Canterbury high country. While there, they plan mild distraction: she will sit for her portrait by a gifted artist especially flown across the world at Reece's expense for just this task, and there will be a small operatic performance in the lodge's theatre, the premiere of a work by a new young composer, the very beautiful Rupert Bartholomew, an ardent fan of La Sommita, plucked from the crowd and propelled toward greatness as her protégé. A cast of great singers has been assembled at Lake Waihoe, the great and good of the international musical world have been invited to be present and there is only one difficulty: the work itself, an opera based upon the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi, unfortunately titled *The Alien Corn*, is appalling. La Sommita has permitted her infatuation with her young protégé to cloud her judgment and he is in distress, knowing that he faces complete public humiliation.

So, this is the situation which Alleyn and Troy come upon when they arrive at Lake Waihoe: the premiere is imminent, the cast is assembled, the storm clouds are gathering above the mountains. And we sit back to await the inevitable murder.

It's a detective story in the classic mode: there is a large cast – 22 individuals, quickly and deftly drawn, several of whom are revealed to be sufficiently jealous, angry, resentful, to have a motive for murder. There is the isolated setting, that sense of removal, of a closed environment from which escape is not an option: the storm rolls in, the lodge is accessible only across a lake and

that is rendered impassable, characters are trapped in close propinquity to one another, passions seethe beneath the surface. There are hints of a wider world and of a past that is reaching its climax at just this point in time and in this place.

There is the detective's arrival: a fortuitous arrival, he has not been called in post-murder to conduct an investigation. Instead he finds himself plunged into detection by circumstance. The first 101 pages set all this up: the scene, the characters, the murder and the second half is given over to detection: that slow delicious tracking of clues, the false leads, the unpeeling of layers of character, of feelings and motives previously unsuspected, the logical sequence that leads inevitably to the scene in the drawing room where all the characters gather to hear the detective identify the murderer – or in this case, murderers – and explain all.

That is the novel. It belongs on the page, to a long wet afternoon lying on the sofa, unscrambling clues. It belongs to that era between the wars when puzzles became suddenly immensely popular: to the era of the crossword for example, which had its origins in America just before the first world war and migrated to England in the 20s – to the pages of the Telegraph in 1924, the Guardian in 1929, the Times in 1930.

The detective novel is a close cousin, another kind of game, a puzzle to be solved, a middleclass diversion, requiring leisure and literacy. It's also, interestingly, the game of people who had only a little over a decade earlier been touched by real murder. Murder on a massive scale, on the Somme, at Ypres, bodies blown to pieces, bodies left to swell and rot among the barbed wire and craters. It is interesting I think how our games rehearse our greatest fears: like small children jumping off fences to test their fear of heights or playing house to rehearse that great unknown future of adulthood that lies before them, we read to calm ourselves, to confront imaginatively what most frightens us in reality. When we read crime fiction we rehearse our fear of death, of the injustice of fate, of that feeling we can have at 4am when we suddenly know that some morning we will not exist. The world will carry on exactly as it always has done, but we won't be here to be conscious of this. We will not be. But in the novel we contemplate that fact in a safe and secure framework: the detective will inevitably find the culprit who has caused untimely death. He will identify him or her, set the machinery of punishment in motion and order will be restored. It's an artifice, a reassuring structure.

In real life, of course, things are very different. A friend for instance who lives in a rural area in the North Island told me about the death of a neighbour: a woman had been found in the offal pit on a farm with a gunshot wound through the head. The angle of the wound, the gun itself, suggested it was not suicide – but no one has been arrested. No motive has been ascribed. No one has been punished. In a small country we all know I suspect of such stories where a person has mysteriously disappeared, and simply never been found. Of people who have died inexplicably. It's the stuff of small town gossip.

Nor is murder, even when solved, necessarily dramatic nor the stuff of crime fiction. I have taught writing programmes in prison where my students were life

imprisoned. I deliberately didn't find out why – but when another novelist came to teach a workshop one Saturday she turned out to know every single name in the room and the nature of their crime. And the murders were indeed brutal and gristly and deeply sad. The students themselves did not write about death or murder: instead they chose to write about a trip to the beach, or a party. Sometimes you could sense that death was coming close: an exquisite description of a car trip on a moonlit night seemed poised just at that moment before everything turned to bloody nightmare – but the writing stayed with the car trip, the peculiar brilliance of stars overhead on that night of all nights...

So – we have the novel. The detective novel. And on the other hand, we have the play. Two very different genres.

Why did I choose to adapt this book? Well, it wasn't my only proposal. Ross Gumbly and Elizabeth O'Connor at the Court Theatre had asked me in to discuss writing a play for them. Over the past twenty years I have written mainly novels and poetry, but my training is in theatre. I studied drama at the University of Toronto between 1971 and 76. While I was there I wrote a couple of theses, one for my MA about Aphra Behn, the first professional woman writer in English, who produced plays and novellas. And one for my M Phil. about a play by TS Eliot. When I first returned to New Zealand in 1976 I lectured in drama at a teachers training college, developing one of the first theatre in education courses in the country and finding myself having to find plays for a typical primary student teacher intake of 18 young women, and three men. The only solution was to write them myself – adaptations to begin with of myths and stories, and later, pieces where I could invent and develop my own ideas, usually writing to commission: someone for instance wanted a play for 20 young women and girls for the centenary of the YWCA, so I wrote a play about the young women who had been brought out in the 1880s from Britain when the New Zealand government decided to stock the colony and cleared out the workhouses of Ireland and England and Scotland to do so: a friend of mine was studying the passenger lists of the immigrant ships and came upon their names: 12,000 of them, most of them lost to history, unremembered. We took 20 ranging in age from 10 to 24 and breathed an imagined life into them. My first literary award was the inaugural Bruce Mason Award for young playwrights in 1982.

But for the past 20 plus years I have found myself living at the end of a gravel road on the Banks Peninsula and writing and directing plays became difficult. I've written fiction instead. It's more portable.

But in 2011, the Court Theatre asked if I would like to do a play for them, so I went in and brought some ideas: four I think, I can't recall quite what: one was set in a supermarket, four women at the checkout, their customers, the lives of people. Another suggestion was this one: *Photo Finish*.

Now, I'm not a fan of crime fiction. I don't really like murder as a game. I find it impossible not to worry at the corpse. I don't like the suspension of empathy that makes it possible to be interested simply in the puzzle of clues. I always think the corpse could be me. I don't like the misogyny, the barely veiled pornography that is television crime show where the victim is most often a

young woman who can be shown writhing in terror, manacled, gagged, as the murderer approaches. Nor do I like the moral universe of the crime novel, with its bald black and white, its uncomplicated division between good and evil: I think we are a lot more complex and layered than that universe supposes. It's all too simple. I prefer moral ambiguity in fiction. That seems to me to be more truthful.

So I didn't suggest *Photo Finish* because I love crime fiction or Ngaio Marsh's work or this book in particular. In fact, I think the premise on which the whole plot hinges is wobbly. I'm going to give the game away for those of you who might not know or recall it, but the entire plot rests on the proposition that a man who is about to commit a ritual murder, in retaliation for his sister's death many years earlier, one in the long series pertaining to a Sicilian family feud, decides to commit that murder in the very week that he invites into his home the world's most astute detective.

Why would you do that, unless you wish to invite your own execution?

Then there is the business of the opera which forms the novel's central event, and the arrival of the world's greatest conductor, Sir David Baumgarten and many critics and great musical eminences to a remote high country lodge, in an era that depends upon roads for transport rather than helicopters. Why would such people travel so far, for so little? They might perhaps be inveigled to some shooting lodge in the Scottish highlands for such a purpose, but to New Zealand? Many many hours of slow flight distant?

*Photo Finish* also commits the cardinal crime in my book at any rate, of depending for its denouement on wild and unlikely coincidence: idling in the library one night, Alleyn simply happens upon a book that describes in great detail the origins of the vendetta of which Isabella Pepitone's murder is the most recent. It's like the letter that arrives unexpectedly in a Victorian novel: unsatisfactory, too convenient, a feeble narrative solution, when what the reader wants is the assembly of unremarkable detail that amounts to incrimination when viewed by a logical intelligence: the 'Ah, so that's what it all amounts to! Of course! Why didn't I think of that!'

So no I didn't choose to adapt *Photo Finish* because I admired it as fine writing.

I chose it because it is eminently theatrical.

Ngaio Marsh was a theatrical writer – but this is more theatrical than most of her novels. It has for a start the most dramatic and wonderful heroine in La Sommita, a Maria Callas diva, beautiful, willful and adored. And also cruel. A tiger. A gift for a talented actress. It has a setting that is pure melodrama, with its storm, its impossible luxury in the midst of the wilderness, a tiny island of civilization that crumbles into ferocious barbarity. Reading the novel the musical score plays inevitably in the mind: the Force of Destiny overture as Alleyn and Troy race across the plains toward Lake Waihoe, the aria – it has to be Ebben: ne andro lontana from La Wally, sung by Callas – it can be no other – as the murder is completed, the vendetta carried out, La Sommita suffocated then stabbed with a dagger.

That given, there are, however, difficulties. The stage is a very different medium to the detective novel. It places certain restrictions upon the writer, restrictions that are a kind of pleasure to work within, as all classical forms are: it's like writing a sonnet, finding the form to carry meaning. A play happens within a closed space, before an audience. When you are writing for the stage, you must consider physical realities: if you choose to change a setting – say from one room to another, or across the planet, how will this be done on stage, with the minimum of fuss and delay? The story will be told with lighting and sound and by a cast of actors working with a director a costume designer, a props maker. How many actors can the theatre afford to employ for this production? If the cast is large, and *Photo Finish* remember has 22 names listed at the start – how can this be handled for a live theatre company? Will actors double up, playing several roles in different hats? Or would it be better to eliminate peripheral characters, those who are swiftly dispensed with as irrelevant to the investigation?

And most importantly, how do you tell the story, remaining true to the spirit of the original, without interior monologue or authorial observation? How do you translate, in particular, a fictional genre that depends for its effect on the careful accumulation and discarding of clues, the kind of fiction that is best encountered upon a sofa on a long slow afternoon, at leisure, into a genre that happens to a large number of people simultaneously in the space of a couple of hours? Perhaps allowing time for an interval to head out to the bar, for drink and chat? How do you translate the solitary, private entertainment of reading fiction to the public, sociable entertainment of the stage?

Other playwrights would have made different kinds of accommodation. They might, for example, have retained the cast of 22 and written a play in which actors double or tripled roles. Something like *Oh What a Lovely War*, where we agree that even though we recognize the actor for him or herself, we simply suspend disbelief and see him or her as a new persona. Entering any theatre is to agree to play let's pretend for a spell: we take our seat in the audience and say, 'Go on. Persuade me of the truth of the story you are telling me, and I shall accept that it is not Yvonne Martin on the stage, but an elderly American dowager, desperate and drunken. I'll feel for her the same pity and sense of shared humanity that I would if she were actually there before me and I was permitted to watch her slow and steady disintegration.' I will experience what the Greeks called catharsis, that semi-mystical suspension of disbelief, that sense of witnessing a ritual, taking us right back to the roots of theatre as death rite, as fertility rite.

What did I choose to do? I chose concentration and distillation, making the work as tight and focused as I could manage.

I cut the cast to 10 with no doubling because I find it distracting really, and prefer one actor, one role. I combined two characters who had some similarities of style into one, I eliminated others.

I concentrated the setting. The novel begins in Melbourne immediately after Strix's latest attack on La Sommita, then moves to London where Alleyn chats

with his superior at the Metropolitan Police, then finally touches down at Reece's luxury lodge at Lake Waihoe in New Zealand. I moved straight to the lodge, with Alleyn and Troy's arrival. In classical drama, the unities of time and place were observed and it is a form I like: as much as possible in one place, as closely as possible within the 24 hours that playwrights from Euripides to Corneille or Racine favoured or more recently, Eugene O'Neill and that long day's descent into family disintegration and madness. I chose this approach for the same reason that I sometimes like writing ballads – the form concentrates the meaning. Everything feels concentrated, under tension. I hate long scene changes, with people blundering around in the dark shifting furniture. I like to keep the story, the narrative, racing along.

I divided the work into two halves, allowing for an interval, which means structuring the work so it builds toward two climaxes: one at the end of the first half, where La Sommita is found dead – and in my play though I don't think in the production under way at the Court – there is a scene within a scene, a first sight of La Sommita's body, lying on her bed. I imagined thick dark red velvet curtains of the kind that formed the backdrop to opera in the 50s and 60s when I chose to set the play – for I had also changed the era of the play. A liberty I know, but Marsh had set her novel in the 70s but it didn't feel to me as if it truly belonged there: it seemed to me to reference an earlier era – the fifties, the era of the great operatic diva, of Maria Callas and the fabulously wealthy Aristotle Onassis.

After the read through last year I was relieved to hear a friend who is an opera singer and worked at Covent Garden say that my instincts were right: the era of the temperamental operatic soprano, behaving with absolute disregard for the convenience or feelings of others round her, had well and truly passed by 1980, she assured me. The power in opera had shifted from the soprano to the director. Which is how I remember it. When I went to operas in the 1970s they were billed as the work of specific directors. You still went to hear certain singers, but going to an opera in Rome where the traditional clique system still operated with fans of rival singers fighting to cheer the loudest for their star and the proceedings paused for several minutes after each aria and multiple bows and curtain calls – seemed old fashioned, something of the distant past. Instead you went to see operas where an autocratic director had insisted that everyone wear their underwear, or sing lying flat on their backs or fade into his grand scenic design. La Sommita wouldn't have lasted two minutes in such a world.

So *Snap!* is set in about 1963.

When I halved the play, the first climax is of the body's discovery. The maid screams that her mistress is dead, dead – and the actress playing this role at the Court has a most excellent scream – the music rises – an operatic aria, the beginning to Ebben? Ne andro lontana, the curtain rises the light singles out La Sommita and Alleyn walks alone to the foot of her bed. Blackout, end of scene.

And the second half builds to that same conclusion, only this time the audience witnesses the murder as the detective retells it to the audience gathered in the drawing room. A spotlight singles out the soprano being prepared for sleep by

her devoted maid, the man she trusts as her companion, the music builds again. Ebben? Ne andro lontana – the aria Callas sang so beautifully in which a young woman sings of journeying alone, leaving her home, her village, the only place she has ever known, to travel alone to a strange and distant place. The soprano lies on the bed. The companion grasps her wrists firmly, the maid places chloroform over her mouth and then plunges a dagger into her heart.

And why that aria? Because it is sublime, and because I wanted to switch the tone. Up until this point, the play has been a kind of black comedy, with its cast of stereotypical characters, its stormy lake, its heightened melodramatic tale of murder and revenge. It is artifice. It is frequently funny, as the stage version of another novel – John Buchan’s *Thirty Nine Steps* had by the end of the twentieth century become absurd. Its tale of evil Germans – they’re definitely ‘Huns’ and ‘Krauts’ in Buchan’s book – unlikely car chases and aeroplane chases and cunning disguises had lost its original suspense and power and become a period piece. *Photo Finish* is funny. It’s a diversion intended to amuse and entertain. But at its core is a death. A woman dies – and not just a woman, but a great voice. Now, there aren’t very many amongst us on the planet with great voices. They are rare and beautiful things, soaring, powerful, strong enough to project above an entire orchestra playing at full volume. A soprano of such caliber is precious, no matter how badly mannered she was or how unkind.

I find it curious that Ngaio Marsh chose to write such a character at this precise stage in her life. She was in her 80s, approaching her own death, and in this fiction she chose to write about the death of a great woman. Fiction is a rehearsal, as I said earlier, for the reader, who can rehearse, through play, through imagination, their deepest fears.

But fiction is also a rehearsal for the writer. There is a deep poignancy I think that in this book, this murder mystery, this entertainment, a great woman writes about the death of another great woman.

So that is why, at the end of the play, the soprano’s voice soars out above all, and the mood I hope shifts: not hilarious, but with that catch to the throat that you feel when listening to a great singer, a great soprano, singing of longing, and being a human and deeply alone.

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She has published six novels, two collections of short stories, three collections of poetry, several plays including the popular *Chook Chook*, and two books of non-fiction relating to the Christchurch earthquakes. She has won numerous awards, including the 1995 Mansfield Award to Menton, and in 2007 the Prime Minister’s Award for Fiction. In 2012 she was awarded the ONZM (New Zealand Order of Merit) for services to Literature.