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BIOGRAPHY



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Mason, Bruce Edward George

1921–1982

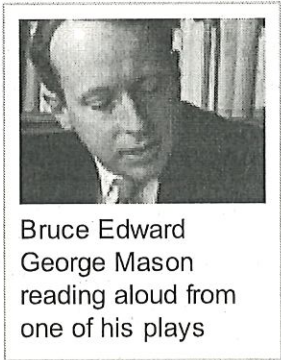
1957

Playwright, actor, critic

By David Dowling

Biography

Bruce Edward George Mason was born on 28 September 1921 at Wellington, the son of Howard George Mason, a New Zealand-born accountant, and his English wife, Anne March. Bruce's family moved to the seaside suburb of Takapuna, Auckland, when he was five. He later wrote: 'This huge panorama has formed a backdrop to my life. No anguish but was not subtly redeemed by it: no joy not deepened by it'.



Bruce Edward George Mason reading aloud from one of his plays

He attended Belmont School (1927–34) and Takapuna Grammar School (1935–37). The family returned to Wellington and Bruce attended Wellington College in 1938. He then worked as a law clerk, and in 1940–41 was a student at Wellington Training College. *Focus*, a one-act play written when he was 19, was presented there in 1941. From 1941 he served with the New Zealand Scottish Regiment and then the Divisional Signals. Mason joined the Royal New Zealand Navy in 1943, becoming a sub-lieutenant in 1944. After demobilisation he married Diana Manby Shaw, a Wellington medical practitioner, on 17 December 1945 at Tauranga. They were to have two daughters and a son.

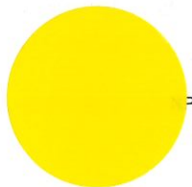


Bruce Mason describes the genesis of 'The end of the golden weather'

Mason graduated BA from Victoria University College in 1946 and was a research assistant with the Department of Internal Affairs War History Branch until 1948. In 1948–49 he was assistant curator of manuscripts at the Alexander Turnbull Library. During this time he published a short story, 'The glass wig', and became involved with the socialist-orientated Unity Theatre, serving on the committee for periods from 1948. As president in 1949 he called on members to write their own plays.

In May 1949 the Masons travelled to England, where they shared a house in London with Richard and Edith Champion. Bruce taught at a drama school, rejected a career as a concert pianist after auditioning with Albert Ferber, and returned to New Zealand in late 1951 to manage an orchard in Tauranga. In 1952 the family settled in Wellington, where Bruce worked as public relations officer for the New Zealand Forest Service from 1952 to 1957. During the 1950s he began writing and directing his own plays at Unity Theatre. He also won prizes in the New Zealand Branch of the British Drama League playwriting competition. In 1955 he began work as radio critic for the *New Zealand Listener*, a position he held until 1961.

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In 1957 Mason became senior journalist at the Department of Tourist and Publicity, and that same year co-directed *The pohutukawa tree* for the Champions' New Zealand Players. This play, written in 1955, examined the conflict between Maori and European values, and was to be widely performed and read. In 1957 he also published his theatre manifesto, *Theatre in danger* (written with John Pocock), in which he stressed the need for higher standards and greater authenticity in New Zealand drama.

The following year he wrote and directed *Birds in the wilderness*, winner of the Auckland Festival Society national playwriting competition; the play was subsequently produced in Auckland and London. He was also a member of a cultural delegation to the USSR, where he met 'Igor', a dissident and the inspiration for his 1965 solo work *To Russia, with love*. Back in Wellington he became drama critic for the *Dominion* newspaper, a position he held from 1958 to 1960.

In 1959 Mason wrote, directed and performed the solo work by which he is best known, *The end of the golden weather*, based on reminiscences of adolescence. His decision to write solo works was made for practical reasons: they required minimal resources to produce and could be taken on tours without difficulty. *The end of the golden weather* was first performed in Wellington, after which Mason took it on a nationwide tour from 1959 to 1962.

From 1960 to 1961 Mason was editor of *Te Ao Hou*, a magazine about Maori issues produced by the Department of Maori Affairs. This was followed by employment as record critic (1961–62) and music critic (1964–69) for the *New Zealand Listener*, and as senior copywriter for Wood and Mitchell Advertising Limited (1969–71). The 1960s was a time of significant developments in New Zealand theatre, and Mason was at the centre of them. His satirical cabaret *We don't want your sort here* was staged all over New Zealand in 1961 as *Late night extra*. In 1963 he was the New Zealand delegate to the international drama conference in Edinburgh. He performed *The end of the golden weather* at the Edinburgh Festival, and later to an invited audience in London.

In 1964 he was involved in the establishment of Downstage Theatre, Wellington, the first professional theatre in New Zealand. He served as vice president from 1964 to 1976. *The counsels of the wood* (a one-man play comprising *To Russia, with love* and *The last supper*) was produced there in 1965, and toured New Zealand the following year. This work reflected Mason's growing interest in American culture and politics, especially the Cold War. *The waters of silence* (a one-man play, an adaptation of a work by Vercors) was also produced at Downstage Theatre in 1965. Around this time he began to write or adapt plays for radio and television. In 1965 *Awatea*, his 'greatest single success' (as he called it), was recorded for radio by Inia Te Wiata and the Maori cast of *Porgy and Bess*. Like *The pohutukawa tree*, it examined the disparities between European and Maori culture. In 1967 he established and edited *ACT* magazine for Downstage Theatre.

Mason published a text for schools, *New Zealand drama: a parade of forms and a history*, in 1973. This general survey of international and national theatre also described the genesis of *The pohutukawa tree*. He continued to write, produce and perform solo works: *Not Christmas, but Guy Fawkes* was commissioned for the South Pacific Festival in Rotorua in 1976, and he also staged his *Courting blackbird* in Christchurch. In 1977 he received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University of Wellington. From 1973 to 1978 he was again drama critic for the *Dominion*, and later he performed the same function for the *Evening Post*. Such was his influence, it was said of his reviews that they could 'fill – or empty – a theatre'.

An operation for a carcinoma of the parotid gland in 1978 was followed by a period of declining health. Nevertheless, in 1980 *Blood of the lamb*, Mason's most complex, daring and satisfying play, about a lesbian couple with a child, premiered at the Court Theatre, Christchurch, then toured New Zealand and Australia before being published in 1981. He was made a CBE in 1980. In 1981 the governor general, Sir David Beattie, launched *Bruce Mason solo*, a publication of four of his solo works accompanied by a set of cassette tapes. Bruce Mason died in Wellington on 31 December 1982, survived by his wife and children. In 1996 the Bruce Mason Centre, incorporating

the Bruce Mason Theatre, was opened in Takapuna.

Generations of New Zealanders have grown up with Mason's view of their country, through his own performances of *The end of the golden weather* or through studying and performing *The pohutukawa tree* in high school. In the 1970s he conceived the idea of a cycle of five plays which focus on Maori culture since European contact: *Hongi* (the clash of religions), *The pohutukawa tree* (the Maori in exile), *The hand on the rail* (the Maori in the city), *Swan song* (the Maori returning to his roots), and *Awatea* (creating a modern Maori myth). This play cycle was published in 1987 as *The healing arch*. He deliberately placed his Maori themes in the aesthetic conventions of European theatre (notably Greek tragedy), so that they became bicultural exercises exemplifying how Maori and European rituals could be mixed without incongruity. Maori culture also gave Mason a perspective from which to critique his own. 'What kind of a society can develop under corrugated iron?' he once asked.

In many ways Mason was a self-made man who created, among his many other myths, the myth of himself. Mervyn Thompson called him 'a Don Quixote tilting away at a landscape that doesn't quite live up to his heroic aspirations'. Highly cultured and literate, Mason longed to make contact with the average New Zealander. In his monologue *Not Christmas, but Guy Fawkes* he observed: 'if I could not communicate with them, it was because they refused communication with me, or he likes of me. And the reasons for this refusal have become the mainspring of my work'.

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