

How the fight against Covid became a war between each other: Stuart McKenzie and Dame Miranda Harcourt

In early 2021 writer Stuart McKenzie and director Miranda Harcourt's verbatim play *Transmission* opened to sell-out houses at Pōneke's small, dynamic BATS Theatre. Fast forward three years and a sequel *Transmission Beta* is about to premiere. And it's a quite different, more complex story.

RNZ Digital reporters

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In early 2021, writer Stuart McKenzie and director Miranda Harcourt's play *Transmission* about our early COVID-19 response opened to sell-out houses at Pōneke's small, dynamic BATS Theatre.

It was a time of some jubilation. New Zealanders felt proud, maybe a little sheepish even, of being able to go out to the theatre when other countries weren't so lucky. With our borders closed, we were safe.



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How the fight against Covid became a war between each other

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Miranda Harcourt and Stuart McKenzie

Based on interviews by McKenzie with then-prime minister Jacinda Ardern, then-deputy PM Grant Robertson and epidemiologist Dr Michael Baker, among others, the non-fiction play told the remarkable behind-the-scenes story of how a so-called 'team of five million' managed an early lockdown to avoid the death of an estimated 20,000 people.

However - as if auguring what was to come - the season at the Auckland Arts Festival was cancelled due to the Omicron outbreak, so they parked that first play as a kind of placeholder in time.

"But as things seemed to fracture, and the whole culture and society seemed to be in a foment, we went, 'Look we have to do another show.'"

Fast forward three years and a sequel *Transmission Beta* is about to premiere. And it's a quite different, more complex story.

It's about the fallout.

Elimination turns to suppression, MIQ restrictions become intolerable, the vaccination rollout becomes divisive and social media increasingly toxic. The divide between friends and family - arguably not seen since the 1981 Springbok Tour - sees an encampment protest outside Parliament, ending in disturbing scenes.

Transmission Beta is as much about the truth - and who gets to tell it - at a time when it continues to be questioned. McKenzie quotes Tolstoy at the head of his new play script: "A king is history's slave".

But is this history too recent, too raw to tell? asks Culture 101's Mark Amery.

"I never think it's too soon, because personal memory shifts so much that you really have to capture it in the moment, and that's what we have done with *Transmission* and *Transmission Beta* - and that's why the productions are so vivid," says McKenzie.

For life and work partners Harcourt and McKenzie, *Transmission Beta* has been a return to docudrama. The duo were determined not to be partisan with their latest version of NZ's Covid response.

"We're opening up the space for a number of different voices, to hear those and listen to people of different viewpoints."

They returned to the controversial subject with "great eagerness", Dame Miranda says. The resignation of Jacinda Ardern presented them with a "whole new story".

"For me as a theatre maker, the representation on stage of what the audience all went through together was a very exciting one."

With two more weeks of rehearsal to go, every day she "can't wait" to get back into the room to "grapple with this amazing material again".

"It's so complex, it's so moving - and it's so unexpectedly funny. It's intensely theatrical.

"As a community, we've got this weird cognitive dissonance where we've collectively forgotten about what we collectively went through because it was so disturbing, that we've all just gone, 'You know what? I'm just going to put that in a little plastic bag in my mind and forget about it.' "



Dame Miranda Harcourt and Stuart McKenzie in rehearsal for *Transmission Beta*, supplied

Our main political characters again give rare access to the playwright. In a move that is truly meta, they even critique the way they (and history) were portrayed the first time around. In one instance, there are even multiple versions (performed and projected) of 'Stuart McKenzies' on stage.

Ardern and Robertson were "extremely generous" with their time, McKenzie says, "but I don't think it was always easy for them, given the criticisms coming from different areas."

This time, McKenzie casts his net wider, bringing in characters as diverse as journalist Bernard Hickey and politician John Tamihere - both solidly critical of the effect of government policies on the poor and marginalised - as well as anti-vaccine protesters, interviewed at Parliament.

All of those "characters" got to read the draft play, but McKenzie says he retained editorial control.

"They will reflect on how things have been portrayed in the play, and have their opinions about that."

Hickey spent some of his childhood in Murupara - as did Ardern. The "crossover" of those stories appears in the play.



Actor Sophie Hambleton with Dame Jacinda Ardern Supplied

Some have said *Transmission* "shined the halos" of the key players. Could they have been more critical of the government's Covid response?

"There is a limit to what you can do... We weren't trying to pretend to give a history of the international outbreak of Covid, so our focus was on NZ."

The couple arrived back from London on one of the last flights before the first 2020 lockdown and immediately made a beeline for Dr Michael Baker.

"We were really interested in the interplay between science and politics in this area, so we also reached out to Grant and Jacinda - New Zealand's a small enough country it allowed us to do that."

Harcourt's acclaimed 1993 play with William Brandt, *Verbatim*, told the story of a burglary gone wrong from multiple verbatim-recorded perspectives, and with McKenzie, the play *Portraits*, about the rape of a young girl in a small town, followed.

This track record of docu-dramas meant the politicians could trust them with their perspectives on what happened.

New voices in the sequel include anti-mandate protesters and police, but the politicians provide an "emotional throughline" for the play, McKenzie says.

"There's all these voices that think one thing, and are very critical of all the decisions that other people make, but Jacinda and Grant and Michael Baker ... are the characters that we follow emotionally."

The duo went down to Wellington a few times and McKenzie was in the midst of the Parliament protest on 2 March when paving stones were being ripped up and thrown and tear gas was let off.

"At one point I went, 'Um I'm actually right in the firing line here because I'm on the protesters' side and ... I'd better move away,' because it was getting pretty intense and dangerous and alarming."

Could he understand where the protesters were coming from?

"Of course... What's interesting about the play is that the certainties that we held at the time come under scrutiny in this play so anybody who is rabidly for or against something will hear the voices from people who hold a different position.

"It's not a play that is trying to set out and convince you with arguments. It's a play that is listening to people's stories about who they are, where they've come from and why they think like they do. In a fractured society, nobody listens to each other but the value of this kind of theatre is you get an opportunity to listen."

Bringing themselves into the drama to examine personal perspectives is also nothing new: 2009's *Biography of My Skin* explored Harcourt's life but as written by McKenzie, while 2012's *Flowers from My Mother's Garden* told the stories of Miranda and her mother Dame Kate Harcourt, but with each telling the other's story. Dame Kate is now aged a grand 96 and living with the Harcourt-McKenzies.



The cast of Transmission Beta. Supplied

With verbatim theatre, the audience "marvels" that somebody actually said those words, says Harcourt.

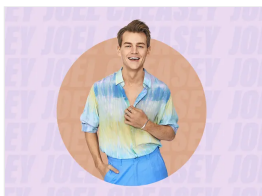
"There's a constant ring in your mind of veracity, so from the audience's perspective, I love that about verbatim theatre.

"Then from a writer's perspective, I love the poetry of the way people really speak. It's an amazing thing to hear... that isn't what writers would write, but... it gives a tone of authenticity."

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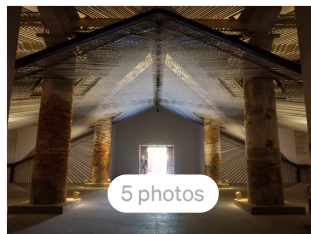
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