

New Zealand arts funding agency attacks Shakespeare as part of “canon of imperialism”

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The recent decision by the public arts funding agency Creative New Zealand (CNZ) to stop its funding for the Shakespeare Globe Centre New Zealand (SGCNZ) was a reactionary attack on the arts in general and on Shakespeare in particular.

CNZ declined a funding application from SGCNZ for \$330,000 over the next three years to help run its popular Shakespeare Festival, an annual event aimed at high school students, which relies heavily on volunteers and is also sponsored by the University of Otago and Sheila Winn. CNZ also refused to renew funding of \$31,800 a year that had been granted to SGCNZ previously. In the 31 years since the festival began, more than 140,000 young people from across the country have participated in it, workshopping, directing and performing scenes from Shakespeare’s plays.

The funding cut was widely condemned over the past month by actors, writers and members of the public. To put a lid on the controversy, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced on October 18 that the ministry of education would step in to make up the funding for SGCNZ.

The controversy has revealed the toxic mix of nationalism, identity politics, and sheer ignorance that has taken root within CNZ, and in sections of the media and academia. CNZ based its decision on the opinions of two unnamed “external peer assessors,” who were selected to review SGCNZ’s application despite—or more likely because of—their obvious hostility toward Shakespeare.

In a 10-page document outlining the decision the two assessors praise the planning and organisation of the Shakespeare Festival. However, they recommend that SGCNZ’s funding application be declined because: “While both assessors acknowledged the opportunities generated by this organisation for young people to participate and experience art, both questioned the relevance of Shakespeare in contemporary Aotearoa [New Zealand].”

The assessors falsely assert that Shakespeare “was located within a canon of imperialism and [the proposal] missed the opportunity to create a living curriculum and show relevance to the contemporary art context of Aotearoa.”

One assessor conceded that “the Festival can be life-changing, leading to increased confidence and a life-long passion for the performing arts.” But he or she then added: “The application does make me reflect on the ongoing relevance of Shakespeare, and question whether a singular focus on an Elizabethan playwright is most relevant for a decolonising Aotearoa [New Zealand] in the 2020s and beyond.”

The assessors’ notes are self-contradictory—how can the Festival change young people’s lives if Shakespeare is “not relevant” to them?—and reveal a jaw-dropping level of ignorance.

Their reference to a “canon of imperialism” refers to the way Shakespeare’s plays were exploited historically as propaganda for the

British Empire. In New Zealand, during the 1916 Shakespeare centenary celebrations, for instance, the *Dominion* newspaper declared that the playwright was part of “a great Imperial heritage.” It continued: “The men of Shakespeare’s day helped to lay the foundations of the great Empire for the preservation of which we are now fighting.”

As SGCNZ’s founder Dawn Sanders has pointed out, Shakespeare lived hundreds of years before the British Empire. He can hardly be held responsible for how his plays were misused after his death.

Moreover, Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies continue to be performed, read and watched by millions of people in virtually every country in the world, not due to popular support for British imperialism, but because of his work’s enduring, universal appeal. In beautiful language—including many phrases which have entered common usage—and with extraordinary psychological insight, the plays illuminate fundamental human conflicts and emotions, including love, envy, depression, and the lust for power.

There is nothing remotely conservative or rigid about Shakespeare’s work. He was the most remarkable of a group of playwrights who emerged during a period of intense political and social ferment, as the rising bourgeois class was beginning to chafe against the stifling feudal system. Plays such as *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III* demonstrate his profound interest and understanding of the fate of individuals—including men and women of various classes, races and nationalities, who come into conflict with authority, social prejudices and tyrannical regimes.

The plays are not merely the work of “an Elizabethan playwright” as CNZ has it. They are widely recognised as among the greatest works of *world literature*, which ought to be treasured as the common property of humanity.

Such conceptions are frankly sneered at by large numbers of academics, steeped in identity politics, nationalism and critical race theory, which holds that there are insurmountable differences between different cultures, races and genders, which are eternally in conflict. White males, including Shakespeare, are held collectively responsible for oppressing women, LGBT people and indigenous and non-European peoples.

In New Zealand and many other countries, the promotion of ethnic and gender divisions serves to divert attention from the fundamental division in society: the rapidly widening class gulf between the rich and the working class. At the same time, identity provides a lever for some members of the upper-middle class to advance their careers, including in the arts and in the universities, where competition for funding is intense and often vicious.

The positions taken by CNZ are hardly original. They echo statements made last year in a shameful article in the *School Library Journal* in the United States, which pushed for Shakespeare to be “deemphasized,” or

simply replaced, in schools. It quoted academics who pointed to the playwright's "whiteness" and "outdated ideas" in his works including "misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism."

Based on such arguments, one should throw out not only Shakespeare, but also Chaucer, Austen, Dickens, the Brontës, Flaubert, Balzac, Mark Twain, and every other great writer who fails to conform to contemporary upper-middle class prejudices.

Indeed, that is the logic of CNZ's position that Shakespeare is to be judged primarily based on his ethnicity and national origin, not the artistic merit of his plays or even their popularity. This was emphasised on October 16 by CNZ's Arts Council chair Caren Rangi who told *One News* that Shakespeare was "not relevant for a good chunk of our society" and that other funding applicants had been "better able to demonstrate that they can align with [CNZ's] priorities." These were: "supporting M?ori arts, supporting the arts of Pacific organisations, and where we've got a real focus on diversity."

In a defensive statement on October 18, Rangi and CNZ's chief executive Stephen Wainwright disingenuously said, "Creative New Zealand does not hate Shakespeare," while again refusing to reinstate SGCNZ's funding. At the same time, they made the inflammatory comment that they were "appalled that some of the criticism [of CNZ's decision] has become about race."

In fact, it was CNZ which introduced the issue of race by calling Shakespeare "imperialist" and not "relevant" to M?ori and Pacific culture. Now, the agency is seeking to intimidate its critics by suggesting that opposition to the funding cut is racist.

What exactly does it mean to say Shakespeare's plays are not "relevant to a decolonising Aotearoa"? New Zealand officially ceased to be a colony of Great Britain more than a century ago. The country is a minor imperialist power in its own right, and together with Australia dominates much of the southwest Pacific, with a long history of predatory interventions in the region.

From CNZ's standpoint, "decolonisation" apparently means elevating some artists and organisations and de-funding others, in an anti-democratic and secretive process, based on racial and nationalist criteria.

This agenda has its supporters. One article about CNZ's decision quoted Victoria University of Wellington academic Nicola Hyland saying: "It would be a massive, awesome act of decolonisation if we discovered our own stories first and discovered Shakespeare afterwards." She cited the M?ori legend of Hinemoa and Tutanekai, which bears some resemblance to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*.

New Zealand literature and theatre, however, is inconceivable without the influence of Shakespeare and other European writers. Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame, arguably New Zealand's best writers, revered Shakespeare and read him constantly. The world-famous detective novelist Ngaio Marsh produced and directed Shakespeare performances in Christchurch beginning in the 1940s, which laid the foundations for modern professional theatre in New Zealand.

The notion that Shakespeare's prominence somehow impedes the development of M?ori culture is particularly insidious and false. Generations of M?ori writers, directors and actors have also been inspired and shaped by the works of Shakespeare.

Rawiri Paratene, known for his role in *Whale Rider*, once described Shakespeare as the second most influential figure in his life, after his grandfather. Paratene's remarkable career includes countless Shakespeare productions internationally, including at the Globe Theatre in London, through a SGCNZ International Actors' Fellowship.

Paratene has also performed in Rwanda, Namibia, Mexico, Cyprus and Iceland, to name just a few places. He worked with teenagers in Sri Lanka traumatised by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami to produce an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Pericles*. The play, called *Children of the Sea*, won four awards at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Would CNZ and its supporters dismiss such international work as "irrelevant" and in the service of an "imperialist canon"?

Rangimoana Taylor, who founded the M?ori Theatre company Te Ohu Whakaari in the 1980s and was one of the founders of Taki Rua Theatre in Wellington, has also served as a judge in the SGCNZ Shakespeare Festival. He told Radio NZ in 2010: "Shakespeare let me understand what language was about... For me and other M?ori that I've seen, they take to Shakespeare like the proverbial duck to water, once they get it, because they say: this is talking about and to us."

One of the many actors who spoke out against CNZ's decision was Waihoroi Shortland, who acted in the acclaimed 2002 film *The M?ori Merchant of Venice*—the first film entirely in M?ori language. In 2012, Shortland and Paratene were in a M?ori adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida*, which was performed at the Globe Theatre in London to rave reviews.

The attack on Shakespeare based on his ethnicity has the most reactionary implications, regardless of the phony "anti-colonial" rhetoric used to justify it. If carried out consistently, CNZ's "decolonisation" agenda would mean cutting young people off from some of the greatest, most thoughtful works of literature, which would have a major impact on their ability to think critically.

Such attacks, to the extent that they are incorrectly seen as coming from "the left," play directly into the hands of right-wing politicians. Far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour released a statement posing as a defender of SGCNZ and declaring: "All cultures deserve respect in New Zealand, not just those that fit with the left's ideology." ACT has long advocated major cuts to public funding for the arts (along with education and other basic services) and making the sector even more subject to the dictates of the market.

As the world lurches towards World War III, governments are once more seeking to prepare their populations for war by demonising "foreign" culture. Most notably, as part of the US-NATO war against Russia, the Ukrainian government is censoring Russian literature, and a global campaign is underway to "cancel" and deplatform Russian performers and musicians.

Arts and education programs are being subjected to drastic cuts, in order to pay for greater military spending and for the unprecedented state bailouts of big business over the past two years. It is all the more imperative for workers, youth, students, and all progressive-minded people to stand in defence of access to culture, including Shakespeare, against the rising tide of state-sponsored ignorance, racial politics and nationalism.



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