

Funding cut to Shakespeare Festival in New Zealand widely opposed

Tom Peters
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The decision by Creative NZ (CNZ) to cut its funding for the Shakespeare Globe Centre New Zealand (SGCNZ)—which runs the popular annual Shakespeare Festival for young performers—provoked widespread outrage last month, forcing the Labour Party-led government to intervene and restore the funding via the Ministry of Education.

The outpouring of support for SGCNZ and the Festival reflects both the enduring popularity of Shakespeare's works, as well as anger over the ignorant and reactionary claims made by CNZ's funding assessors, who wrote that Shakespeare was "located within a canon of imperialism" and was not "relevant" to "a decolonising Aotearoa [New Zealand] in the 2020s." The WSWS condemned CNZ's positions here.

CNZ's decision was supported by some commentators on the *Spinoff*, *Stuff*, Radio NZ and Re: News, which variously denounced Shakespeare as "boring," outdated, too difficult, and for being a "white guy" and not born in New Zealand. Significant sections of the upper middle class—in media and academic circles and in the state bureaucracy—have embraced the deeply reactionary notion, based on racial identity politics, that Shakespeare-related projects should be de-emphasised or de-funded, because of his ethnicity and nationality.

Among the broader population, however, Shakespeare's plays are viewed as some of the greatest works of literature in history, with enduring relevance to people in every country and of every ethnicity.

The Shakespeare Festival has attracted 140,000 participants over the last three decades, from schools across the country. Former participant Cherie-rose summed up the sentiments of many on the *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) Facebook page, writing: "I loved being a part of [the festival]! Shakespeare will always be relevant, his themes touch every part of the world and nothing good would come out of getting rid of it." Hundreds of similar comments have appeared on social media.

The writer Vincent O'Sullivan stated in a letter to the ODT that CNZ's decision was "a breathtaking absurdity from a body whose brief is to promote excellence in the arts. It is an attempt to discourage a new generation from reading the world's most significant playwright, and by implication, most of English literature as well." Well-known actors also spoke out in support of SGCNZ, including Sam Neill, Robyn Malcolm and Michael Hurst.

The WSWS spoke with Dawn Sanders, the founder and chief executive of the SGCNZ, who said she was "absolutely gobsmacked" when her funding application was declined. She pointed out that Stephen Wainwright, chief executive of Creative NZ, had never attended the Shakespeare Festival's annual performances, despite receiving free tickets, and questioned how he could make an informed decision about SGCNZ's relevance.

Contrary to CNZ's claim—made without any attempt to justify it—that SGCNZ "seems quite paternalistic," Sanders explained that the Festival allows high school students to adapt, direct and perform their own scenes from Shakespeare's plays. The event is inclusive of all genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and participants can perform scenes in the language and costume of their choosing.

Asked why young people in particular are drawn to the plays, Sanders said: "For one thing, it's damn good writing." She added that it was easy nowadays to find explanations of unfamiliar language, and "there's a lot more knowledge about the insults, the bawdiness and double entendres, which young people delight in getting to know. They can use words that are quite naughty, and have fun doing it, no doubt in a way that Shakespeare and his actors would have done." Students were encouraged to embrace the "irreverent" spirit of the plays and to "play around with them."

Sanders said: "Shakespeare has lasted for over 425 years because his writing is about human nature, human psyche, human relationships, parents being forceful, misogynistic males, coping with deaths, coping with suicide—there's so many examples, and they end up being trigger topics for class discussions."

The claim that Shakespeare remains part of an imperialist canon showed "total ignorance," Sanders said. "For one thing, the Empire only comprised Ireland in [Shakespeare's time]; it wasn't even an Empire." She was baffled by the statement that Shakespeare was not relevant to "decolonising Aotearoa," pointing out that if CNZ's criteria was applied consistently it would mean de-funding a large number of European writers, composers and artists, not just Shakespeare: "Do we stop doing *Sleeping Beauty* by Tchaikovsky?"

Sanders was particularly hurt by the insinuation made by CNZ and some media pundits, that funding SGCNZ would somehow detract from supporting Māori and Pacific island artists. She pointed out that SGCNZ had helped to instil a love of acting and supported the careers of actors and directors from many different backgrounds.

Mahanga Mitchell, a young Māori actor who participated in the Shakespeare Festival, and was supported by SGCNZ to travel to The Globe theatre in London, told Newshub that CNZ's funding cut was "criminal." The program, he said, had "taken a young Māori boy from a small rural community in Northland, from a village with less than 50 people, to London and the other side of the world performing Shakespeare in the most famous theatre stage... You could look at really any movie in like modern day times and you could relate some of the themes and concepts back to Shakespeare's original ideas."

The WSWS also spoke with actor Waihoroi Shortland, who played Shylock in the 2002 film, *The Māori Merchant of Venice* (*Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti*)—the first film entirely in Māori language. He

was named New Zealander of the Year in 2003 on the basis of his performance. In 2012 Shortland was part of a M?ori adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida*, which was performed in London to rave reviews.

Shortland said he felt insulted by the implication from CNZ's decision that Shakespeare had "colonised my mind." He described Shakespeare as "work of high literature, both in M?ori and in English." Shortland and many other M?ori actors had been inspired by the work of scholar Pei Te Hurinui Jones (1898–1976), who translated *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*.

Hearing the plays in M?ori, he said, "I suddenly understood [Shakespeare], when I couldn't understand it going through secondary school." He explained that the use of metaphor and "the oratorical nature of M?ori language and Shakespearean language are so alike," and he had come to view the plays as part of M?ori culture.

"As an actor," he said, "you can't get a better base to the craft of acting, unless part of that craft is moulded on the traditions of acting. There is no better base to the traditions of acting than that provided to us by the Bard. So to have a group of 'creative New Zealanders' now say: let's deny another generation of people the capacity to explore the writings... it's too outrageous to think about."

Shakespeare, he said, had "stood the test of time" because of "the way he paints the world. Here's a man with a global understanding, who didn't need modern technology, didn't need our early morning news broadcasts about Ukraine and the inhumanity of man towards man. We can feast on this stuff on a daily basis from any corner of the world. But here's a man who was able to capture all of that, just sitting with a quill pen and transcribing his thoughts of how he envisaged the world around him."

Auckland University emeritus professor Michael Neill, who edited the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Othello*, is another expert who spoke out publicly against CNZ's decision. He told the WWS the decision was part of a trend "that's become conspicuous in the United States, for example, with that business of 'disruptingculture.' It's part of a process whereby any work of literature that comes out of a past whose values don't appear to be precisely those of the present day, whatever they might be, is liable to censorship of some sort."

He referred to the case of Bright Sheng, a composer and University of Michigan academic who was persecuted for showing a scene from a film version of *Othello* starring Laurence Olivier, based on the ludicrous accusation that this was somehow harmful to students. Neill was one of many people who wrote to the university demanding Sheng's reinstatement with an apology for how he was treated.

"I always believed that a university could exist as a place where ideas could be debated, where young people learned to think, and work out their own position about things," Neill said. "That happens to be one of the great values of Shakespeare's plays, among other things. They are instruments for thinking about the world."

Responding to the claims made by CNZ's assessors, Neill said it was true that "Shakespeare was invented, really in the eighteenth century, as the Bard of England and was made part of imperialist projects. Shakespeare was taken to every country that was colonised and presented as proof of a superior civilisation and so on. That doesn't mean that that was Shakespeare's project. It doesn't mean that that's what you will find in his plays."

In an open letter to CNZ, Neill pointed out that Shakespeare's work had become a "weapon of decolonisation" in many parts of the world. In addition to the M?ori adaptations of Shakespeare, he pointed to Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who wrote a novel based loosely

on *The Tempest*.

Neill, who has lectured on postcolonial interpretations of Shakespeare, told the WWS: "*The Tempest* draws upon all sorts of texts about voyaging, exploration, the imminence of a colonial world... The island has been colonised by Prospero. It's hard to see it as a play that is advocating the expansion of empire. The figure of Caliban is extraordinarily interesting in this context. Caliban says to Prospero: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse.' It's a play that, from the very beginning, was asking people to think about what it meant to enter so-called new worlds."

Othello, Neill said, was "unusual in placing at its centre a black character sympathetic to the audience—even though we see him as a murderer—and unusual in that it delves into the humanity of this character, just as it does into the humanity of Iago.

"One of the marvellous things is that Shakespeare never adopts a doctrinal position. That's why the plays come alive in all sorts of different cultural contexts and political contexts. Even when Shakespeare's dealing with obvious villains like Richard III, or with feeble incompetents like Henry VI, he's always interested in the humanity of these characters.

"A good friend of mine who's a professor of theatre in Israel and a director there has been in trouble for being interested in staging plays by Arab and Palestinian writers, and using Palestinian actors alongside Jewish actors and so on. One of the things that got him into trouble at university is that he said, in one of his lectures: 'Each one of us should recognise that we have a potential Eichmann inside of us.' I think that's, in a way, what Shakespeare's plays can do."

Neill viewed the attacks on Shakespeare internationally as bound up with "an attack on the humanities, which is driven by various forces, and English departments have suffered particularly badly from this. My own department used to have 30 full time staff, at its peak. It's now down to seven, even as the university has continued to grow."

One aspect was "the advent of postmodernist critical theory, which destabilised the whole idea of a canon" and was "very destructive to the teaching of English literature." It made it harder for English departments "to justify what they were teaching and why."

At the same time, during the 1984–1990 Labour Party government of David Lange in New Zealand "it was announced that education is a business like any other. And so, people were encouraged to think of university education as being all about getting qualifications that would earn you money. So now you see that it is departments and faculties that are seen as leading to profitable careers that flourish, and the humanities are seen as a sorry waste of time."

Neill concluded that "whatever one thinks about Shakespeare and other writers of the past, I think it's extraordinarily dangerous for any society to begin erasing history, and the history of literature is a really important part of the larger history of society: how we came to make the kind of world that we've made, how we came to think about the world. There are all those cliches about how those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it, but I think some of that is true. And like it or not, Shakespeare is one of the things that have made us all, and that's come to be true of many M?ori as well."



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