

The End of the Golden Weather

By Bruce Mason, in a company version by Raymond Hawthorne

The Court Theatre

3 May – 7 June

Review by Robyn Peers

May heralds the end of the golden weather in Christchurch but with this play we welcome the start of a golden era with the opening of the new Court Theatre. It's a joy to walk off Gloucester Street into the expansive timber and glass foyer, the theatre open to the street, lights welcoming patrons into the new venue, while the tables of patrons enjoying their pizzas retain a sense of the familiar.

There was a buzz of excitement in the Stewart Family Theatre as patrons took their seats and Ian Mune wandered onto the stage, the storyteller beginning the narration of the opening play, *The End of the Golden Weather*. He tells the tale of a long, hot summer on an Auckland beach where he had once stood at the point between carefree boyhood and adult reality.

Written as a solo piece by Bruce Mason, who toured it extensively in the sixties and seventies, the play fulfils artistic director Dr Alison Walls' demand that the opening play carry symbolic weight, a piece from Aotearoa with a place in our theatrical legacy. It is fitting that the role of the elderly narrator, Bruce Mason remembering his childhood, is played by Ian Mune, collaborator with Mason on the film of the play, created shortly before Mason's death. The script for this production was adapted by Raymond Hawthorne as the ensemble piece performed here.

Though set in the depression of the nineteen thirties, it is a New Zealand familiar to many from childhood: the freedom of the children who wander unsupervised to the beach, piano lessons and church going, the Boy's hair slicked down with brilliantine, a beer crate as verandah table, the discipline of the wooden spoon and "you wait till your father gets home".

The lyrical opening narration which conjured the North Shore scene, was underscored by the clear and bright lighting and the simple set. An old wharf provides ambience, its slope offering elevation while the front stage is transformed by the actors and a few simple props into a variety of settings. Little touches like the women swimming in the sea behind the wharf provided magic.

While the Narrator and James Kupa as the Boy, his younger self, maintain their characters throughout, the stage is peopled by an ensemble of eight creating a large cast, from the Boy's family to schoolmates, neighbours, friends, beachgoers, the ordinary, the eccentric and the conservative. Scenes of middle-class family life are played out, the closeness of the brothers and the squabbles of the siblings depicted with authenticity. There is homemade entertainment; charades, with a bravura performance by Mark Hadlow as Dad, and family friends gathering for the siblings' Christmas concert.

There is, however, unease beneath this seemingly carefree life and events impinge on the Boy's consciousness. His innocence starts to crumble as he becomes aware of the hardship some of his schoolmates are undergoing as the Depression bites and as he sneaks out at night to witness the gathering of the unemployed who meet with the intention to riot.

The most poignant scenes deal with the Boy's relationship with a mentally challenged young man. The Boy knows that the community's treatment of Firpo is unjust, his guardians mistreat him and the Boy's school mates mock. The connection between the two is played with virtuosity by Kupa and Gregory Cooper, our sympathy with Firpo tugged at every movement. In these moments the rapport between the Narrator and his younger self serves to underscore their sympathy. The two mirror body language and expression to emphasize the message, the Boy is leaving the golden weather of his childhood behind.

There was more and more sand between the bathers, wrote Mason. Summer was almost over. This play is a beautifully written recreation of a New Zealand long past. Directed with flair by Lara Macgregor, the performance by The Court Theatre is one which will touch all those who see this memorable opening production.