

Play Review

Keenan, Louise (dir.) 2019, *The Case of Katherine Mansfield*, Cathy Downes, Cheeky Pukeko Productions, The Mansfield Garden, Hamilton Gardens Festival of the Arts, Hamilton, New Zealand, 23 – 24 February.

Reviewed by Gail Pittaway

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) is perhaps New Zealand's most famous literary export. After a happy childhood and schooling in Wellington, she was sent to a finishing school in London by her banker father, then returned to New Zealand in 1906 at the age of eighteen. But she was back in England within two years, having convinced her father to send her back for further musical training. From 1908 until her death from tuberculosis in 1923, she lived a nomadic life with various partners, infatuations and friendships, which culminated in a lasting relationship with John Middleton Murry, editor, writer and critic, part of a literary circle of Modernist writers (including D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf) which alternately embraced and rejected Mansfield. They lived in London, Cornwall, Switzerland for her health, and France where, when war broke out, she was reunited with her beloved brother, Leslie, before he was killed in Belgium in 1915. Some of her most settled times were spent at the Villa Isola Bella, in Menton, on the French Riviera, a property which today is run by the New Zealand government as a creative residence for New Zealand writers.

It was in the last few years of her life after her brother's death that Mansfield began writing stories about her childhood in New Zealand, ostensibly simple and playful but narratives which dealt with social issues such as the class system, and psychological issues such as depression, betrayal and loss of innocence. *The Garden Party* (1921) is one such story, from a collection which was published posthumously. In this story, a wealthy Wellington family plans to throw an extravagant garden party but on the planned day a poorer neighbour is found dead. Laura, the protagonist, goes through the excitement of planning, the shock of discovery and her first encounter with death, and believes the party should be cancelled. Then, at the last minute, she catches sight of herself in her party finery, sporting a glorious new hat and decides the party should after all not be stopped.

Hamilton Gardens is a unique public park in the upper North Island city of Hamilton, in which the history of the garden is being recreated, by geographical and historical sections.

Rather than a Victorian-based botanical collection or an arboretum, the gardens celebrate the garden as an art form and have created gardens in consultation with experts from the countries and eras of origin. The Chinese Scholars' Garden, Japanese Garden of Contemplation, Char Bagh Garden from India, an Italian Renaissance Garden, an English Flower Garden, an American Modernist Garden and Te Parapara (a Māori Garden) form the core of plantings. There are plans for a Baroque garden, a Pasifika garden and a Mediaeval Cloister garden. The most recently opened, The Katherine Mansfield Garden, is inspired by the short story described above, but is in fact a replica of many postcolonial wealthy landowners' gardens from the era before World War 1. Every plant has been checked for temporal authenticity and any plants mentioned in Mansfield's works have been planted here as well. The garden has the facade of a two-storied wooden villa with pretty verandas and fretwork, a circular driveway for horses, carriages and cars to turn in, surrounded by an outer ring with luscious borders of perennial flowers and shrubs. Off to one side is the lawn tennis court on which a marquee has been erected, sheltering a long trestle table set with jars of cordial, plates of cakes and sandwiches, and fruit. At the other end of the tennis course a piano and stringed instruments – violin, viola and **cello** – wait to be played for the party. As such, it is a party in waiting, immaculately kept and none of it is real. All is sculptured, plastered, thrown or cast. None of the food is edible, nor the instruments playable. It is a tribute to Mansfield, but also to that era of leisure and pleasure before the wars ruined everything. But the literary association reminds us of how none of this would have been created or maintained without the work of many servants and other low paid workers. These gardens form the backdrop for an arts festival every year in February when summer is at its peak and the gardens are at their best. Some performances are site-specific, employing fountains, lakes and even the mighty Waikato River which swirls by several parts of the gardens. Others adapt shows for the outdoor environment or the particular themes of each garden and, in February this year, a production of a play about Katherine Mansfield was held in the Katherine Mansfield Garden, a highlight of the festival.

The solo play, 'The Case of Katherine Mansfield', first appeared in the 1980s when Cathy Downes, who had devised and performed it overseas, toured it throughout New Zealand. With its combination of letters, diaries and short stories written by one of our most colourful and significant writers, the monologue uncovers some of the myths and mysteries about this author, using the famous authors' own words. Her obsession with artifice as an important element of art, her passion and remarkable independence for one so young in her era, her

Commented [LE1]: Is this a purposeful apostrophe? I didn't realise it should be used with cello – do you mind just confirming for me that it is supposed to be there? 😊

Commented [GEP2R1]: Yes 'cello is short for violincello the full word, it is absolutely a convention used in music and Mansfield would have used it. Remove it if you think it's too archaic

outspoken sexuality, her petulant spats with other writers and the strange symbiosis of her marriage to John Middleton Murry all emerge throughout the course of the show. Without overworking any of these themes, the play reveals some of Mansfield's motives for writing about the homeland she had left and which keep emerging in her stories, as well as her often cynical view of relationships and social expectations. Downes also includes the reading aloud of two of Mansfield's full stories in the play script, both about children's play and social interaction – *The Prelude* (1917) and *The Doll's House* (1922). It is a huge challenge for the single performer and director to make all these words and – through them – this icon, come alive.

Commented [LE3]: This otherwise felt like an incomplete sentence?

Commented [GEP4R3]: Great thanks!

What a privilege then, to see this play again and, moreover, in the newly created Mansfield Garden, with the façade of a two-storey villa, arched double-hung windows and wooden veranda with wooden fretwork and, everywhere, glorious plantings – the perfect backdrop. We sit on the circular lawn with a fountain at our backs and relive a long gone era, but one which produced this first truly modern New Zealand woman writer. Performer Fay Van der Meulen brings her alive most convincingly, with bobbed hair and flapper dress, moving around the set but always back to the desk at its heart, which is sited in the exact middle of the pretty veranda. Her eyes flash with vitality and wit. Her voice is rich and warm, most beautifully suited to the readings of the two stories but also to convey the quickly shifting moods of her character.

This production, directed by Louise Keenan, makes delightful use of the on-site vintage car, recordings of Debussy and light jazz, and the appropriateness of the setting and time of day. As the sun fades, so does Mansfield's health and the last few scenes in gathering darkness are particularly moving. These recount her restlessness, living in France for the climate, names her illness – pulmonary tuberculosis – and alludes to her decision to seek peace and serenity at the Gurdjieff Institute in Fontainebleau, where she is buried and where her fans and readers still visit to pay tribute.

This performance had a few problems with the head set microphone, causing a few phrases and words to drop and, perhaps because of this technology, the pace of the piece seems a bit too even, needing a little more variety. Also, with an unnecessarily long interval it was a late night. But these are petty matters. It was great to see such fine acting in such a matchless

Commented [LE5]: Is it possible to find a different, more specific word here?

Commented [GEP6R5]: This okay? 'Big night out' is perhaps too colloquial but is what I meant!

setting and to savour the language and embodiment of a writer whose light still burns brightly.

References:

Mansfield, Katherine (1923) The doll's house in *The Dove's Nest*
<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-ManDove-t1-front1-d2.html> accessed 2 May 2019

———(1921) The garden party in *The garden party and other stories*,
<http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/KM-Stories/THE-GARDEN-PARTY1921.pdf>
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