

**THE NEW ZEALAND PREMIERE OF  
AMY ROSENTHAL'S  
*ON THE ROCKS*  
AT THE COURT THEATRE, CHRISTCHURCH, NZ,  
17 JUNE – 17 JULY 2010.**

**Review and Interview by Melissa C. Reimer**

Featuring Claire Dougan as Katherine Mansfield, Jason Whyte as Middleton Murry, Jon Pheloung as D. H. Lawrence and Ali Harper as Frieda Lawrence. Directed by Lara MacGregor.

Well there's no doubt about it, Amy Rosenthal is a talented playwright. *On the Rocks* is a fantastic script. And MacGregor has brought together a fantastic cast. Court Theatre's revival of the summer that Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry spent at Cornwall (April – June 1916) with D. H. and Frieda Lawrence is as entertaining as it is illuminating.

With an impressive list of credits to their names (Claire, Jon and Jason have all worked in theatre and film and Ali, who has a strong musical background, has enjoyed numerous prestigious radio and television posts), nevertheless it's clear that they're all enjoying their roles as two of the giants of literary modernism and their long-suffering spouses. The reviews have been very good and yet it was with trepidation that I ventured to the theatre. Whether or not we care to admit it, we have preconceived notions of what constitutes a good show – obviously we like to be entertained – and in this case, about whom these people were; and we bring these ideas and expectations to theatre. As a PhD candidate, Mansfield has been my life for the past three – four years, though the affinity dates back twenty something years. Would they get it right? I've been disappointed before. Not this time.

The show opens with the feisty Frieda knocking some sense into the passionately destructive Lawrence – I'm not sure who or what feared worse, Lawrence's head or the crockery? They certainly got our attention. Lawrence and Frieda both do a superb job of their accents, the former's testament to his working-class, Nottinghamshire origins and the latter, as if the name didn't give it away, unabashedly and forgivingly German. Given her aristocratic heritage, education and the intellectual circles in which she moved, owing partly to her first marriage to a professor of modern languages, Frieda was probably not as brash as Harper's portrayal suggests – one reviewer aptly describes her as “earthy ... caustic and lusty” (*Presto*). But I believe that this role absolutely demands it and therefore all credit to Harper. We as an audience lapped it up. And, as Alan Scott notes in his review (*The Press*, 21 June), Frieda's antics provide a perfect foil to the more refined Mansfield and haltingly self-conscious Murry.

Dougan is wonderful from her immaculately coiffeured head to her determinedly and yet delicately pointed toes. She perches regally, makes bird-like twitches and elegantly wrings her tiny white hands – cleverly and subtly drawing attention to her profession as a writer. Her hands seemingly involuntarily fly up to her hair – perhaps, between the Lawrence's' furores,

she was only checking the position of her neat black wig? (Dougan is naturally blonde). Whatever it was, it certainly fitted the Mansfield we know from the memoirs of Ida Baker, Ottoline Morrell and Virginia Woolf. Of particular note is Mansfield's almost imperceptible reaction to the mention of her brother's recent death; I don't think I've ever before witnessed such a subtle and yet resounding acknowledgement of pain.

Murry, often perplexed, hands almost permanently deep in his pockets – something the few photos evidence but also a wittily perceptive signpost to his perpetual pecuniary problems – expertly and convincingly alternates between indecision, indignation and quietly but confidently articulated brilliance. And Lawrence? Well Pheloung's probably a lot burlier than the real Lawrence, though apparently Pheloung lost ten kilos for this role, which is no mean feat in a Christchurch winter. Again, like Frieda's characterisation, it works very well on stage. His Thor-like physicality is entertaining and utterly believable.

Surprisingly humble, the actors credit much of their performance to Rosenthal's script which they claim contains all the clues; and certainly, as I've already stated, it is a fantastic script. But it takes a dynamic quartet to bring it to life. This double duo does it justice. Am I biased? No, I don't think so. It is a long play (almost 3 hours) but like Mansfield and Lawrence's lives and the former's writing, there's nothing superfluous. If anything, the duration reinforces the periods of drudgery that plagued the lives of these four moderns, particularly during the bleak war years and the Cornwall interlude. The audience, evidently a knowledgeable bunch who made the requisite authoritative "ahhs", were happy with their lot. So is this a play with street appeal? I believe so. Sure, an insider's awareness makes the textual references all that more enjoyable but the play offers more than 4 strong actors working a clever and complex script. Harold Moot's set works brilliantly, as does Jenny Cunningham's authentic costuming. This season's *On the Rocks* at the Court is real and it's raw, embracing and simultaneously abrasive and it's thought-provoking; it's a genuinely good night out.

Melissa C. Reimer

I met with the crew following a recent performance. Here's what they had to say.

**MR:** Do you think the script is fantastic? *A resounding yes.*

**AH:** It's very clever.

**MR:** How do you prepare for a role like this – as opposed to playing a fictitious character?

**CD:** It's quite nice in a way I suppose. While there's a great deal of pressure, it's quite nice to play a real person in that there is real research that one can do – on their background, on what they went through. So we read lots. We read their work and read works about them, tried to get a handle on them, who they were as people.

**MR:** When you're acting in other roles – and I've read a little about each of you and I'm impressed and overwhelmed by your respective achievements – are they just as real? Or is there more pressure when you're playing characters who really existed?

**AH:** I love it.

**JW:** I don't see a difference, really. I don't. I'm not a big one for actually going and doing a lot of research about the character.

**MR:** Then how did you get it so right?

**JW:** Because it's all in the script. All the clues are in the script.

**CD & AH:** Yes, it's well written.

**JW:** One of the reviewers disagreed and suggested that I was playing him [Murry] too prim. But it's all in the script: "old chap" – all of these words are there. A good writer will give you all of these clues. And if you went too much down the line of "I'm going to play this guy perfectly", then I'm of the wrong age to do it anyway. He's meant to be younger. So I depend on the script. I've done Orwell before and again the script was good enough. Any good script will tell you how to do it. But that's not to say that you don't do any homework because Ali did a lot.

**AH:** I'm a big research girl; I love it. I read everything that I can get my hands on.

**MR:** And it paid off. I love the write-up describing you as "lusty". Is it one of the most fun roles you've had?

**AH:** Yes, it is actually. It's a very new role for me in that it's a „real person’. I've never played someone like this before. Have you Claire?

**CD:** Well I have played a couple „real’ people before.

**AH:** You have to find parts of yourself in the characters you play, tap into that personality. And I do like food and I'm quite a ... a sexual person. *Lots of laughter from the cast.*

**JP:** Sensual Ali, sensual.

**AH:** Yes sensual. And I don't really think I've played someone quite like this. So „earthy’, so sure of herself. I usually play quite naive, innocent and virginal women.

**CD:** Wow, that's my niche market.

**AH:** But I've got older. Yes, I've got older you see. *Laughter from the cast.* It's amazing when roles come into your life. Ten years ago I probably wouldn't have related to a lot of Friedaisms, but now I'm a mother of two. So when in the first scene Frieda cries about having left her three children to be with this man, I can actually relate to it. So when I look at these photos, I actually pretend my children have died. I channel that. Some nights I look at this little boy in the photo who is about two, and my little boy at home who is six months old, well I imagine him dead and imagine what it must be like to look at these photos. I channel these emotions, I tap in.

**MR:** In drama, I used to think about dead cats.

**AH:** I remember the actor Casey Kelly used to think of onions to make him cry.

**MR:** Really? That would just make me hungry.

**AH:** It's funny how we all get into our roles. But the best thing is working with people who are like-minded when it comes to their work.

**JP:** 4 makes for a good team.

**AH:** Quite contrasting. All quite mad.

**CD:** We bonded quite strongly from day one.

**MR:** For how long did you rehearse before the show opened?

**CD:** Four weeks in total. Three weeks in the rehearsal room and then a technical week in the theatre.

**MR:** That seems like, well, not much at all when I consider how much we as an audience saw tonight – how much you put out there.

**AH:** *Laughing* We could have done with another week! It's a very clever script and there is a lot to find in it; and we're still finding stuff. Some nights you're like "wow, that's a different take on that" and it's different to how we found it in rehearsals. Because in rehearsals you're often just in survival mode, trying to get those lines down. It's a real process. I rely on a photographic memory. *Ali turns to her fellow cast members.* What do you rely on?

**JP:** Luck! *Much laughter.*

**JW:** It's a testament to these two really [*Ali and Jon*]; they carry a lot because they were back-to-backing as well. So while we were rehearsing they were also doing a show at night. So Claire and I could at least go home at night and rest. Ali was going to home a family. There was a lot of pressure. It's a massive play; there's a huge amount of words. I've done a

lot of plays and maybe only two come close to this in terms of wording. And the words are beautiful. It has to be that way. Amy's written it that way. It's poetic. Amy's ripped lines from here and there and she's got all that kind of repetition going on. It's a lot for actors. I feel that as an actor you only really get it right after you've repeated it a number of times. And that's what rehearsal is. By the time you've repeated it eighteen times you should have the rhythm in your head and then you can start playing. Then you muscle memory – your mouth – tells you what to do. But first you learn the lines by rote. Your photographic memory is then called upon to give it structure.

**JP:** Things settle in.

**MR:** Is it good every night?

**JP:** Once you get hold of it you can feel that you get it right in different ways every night.

**JW:** It's definitely come a long way since that first night. We knew there was still more there and our director knew there was still more there. And Lara did an amazing job with us because we weren't really ready. We didn't have the poetry of the piece, or ... something. You know we'd get told to drop our voices or whatever, but I think it took getting over that first night and from then on, without blowing smoke up our own arses, we pretty much nailed it every night. And the audience changes every night. We've had people clap after a scene and you kind of think „hmmm' and Ali, who has done a lot of musicals, will comment, “oh, that's very musical” and I've never been in a musical so I think that's really weird. I've not been in many if any shows where the audience claps after each scene; whereas other nights the audience will just sit there and listen.

**CD:** Mmm, they take it in.

**AH:** The lovely thing about this script is the way that Amy has written it. I've had several friends who aren't academics and who probably wouldn't have known who Katherine Mansfield was, or D. H. Lawrence. So I was very interested to hear what they thought. A friend's mother rung me following a show and said “wasn't it a lovely story” and I thought isn't it awesome that it stands on its own; that people can go away having enjoyed the show and that it's also an educational piece, they can say, “okay I know who Mansfield is now; I know who Lawrence is” and that enriches the experience.

**MR:** I wondered about that. I was trying to imagine that I didn't recognise the lines, that I didn't know where or from whom they originated, that I don't sleep with the books. *Wry laughter from the cast.*

**JP:** That's most people's experience of the play. They haven't heard these lines before.

**MR:** Really? They seemed like an audience who knew a fair bit about the subject. They made those all understanding „ahhs' and „hmms' and knowingly nodded at the „right' places.

**AH:** Yes, you do have some of those [knowing] „oh hmms' and you think “yes, they know”. There was a man's voice out there tonight for example and he sounded like he „knew’.

*B Smiling* Yes, there really was.

**MR:** Well I loved it thank you. It was such a treat tonight. I think that you, Jon looked like van Gogh. *Laughter.*

**JP:** Ah yes, especially at the end when I come out in the smock.

**MR:** I liked that because maybe you already know but Mansfield claimed that van Gogh's *Sunflowers* taught her to write.

**JP:** Oh really?

**MR:** She was very interested in modern art. Have you seen Lawrence's paintings?

**JP:** Yes, we saw a handful during rehearsals. They're great and it was good to see them. Lots of nudes.

**MR:** Lots of bushy bits.

**JP:** Yes! *Laughter.*

**MR:** Are you exhausted? *Again, a resounding yes.*

**JP:** Yes, every night. Without fail.

**AH:** Yes, it's very exhausting.

**MR:** Any mishaps.

**CD:** *wryly* ... Mishaps!?

**MR:** Is that your business really?

**CD:** Well it seems like ... *Jon interjects*

**JP:** We haven't had anything that has stopped the show dead, like a terrible mishap that can't be fixed. But the washing line has been a constant challenge. *Laughter.*

**JW:** We had the lights go quite bizarre one night.

**CD:** *Quietly laughing* Yes, we had to stop.

**JP:** Oh yes, the lights!

**JW:** But that's quite a theatrical treat for an audience.

**JP:** Yeah, actually it was wonderful.

**JW:** Because you kind of nick all the magic. They're watching and the house lights come up and the actors are [*Claire laughingly interjects:* "in the dark!"] yeah, fumbling in the dark, the lights are on the audience but not on the stage which the actors are hurrying to leave. The operator has to reset everything; the stage manager comes out to apologise. Then we start the magic again. But it's kind of trippy for an audience because they hear exactly the same lines for the next couple of minutes. I really like the effect of that.

**JP:** Yeah, it's great for us as actors.

**AH:** Yeah, because we weren't 'in the mood'.

**JW:** It teaches the audience that you know all of these lines by rote. That you're acting.

**CD:** Yes, they realise you're not making it up!

**JW:** They see the precision. It really is a trippy thing.

**JP:** So it was actually a good thing for us – that mishap. And yet, it was not our doing, we had no control over it.

**CD:** At the same time, the way in which we've been directed, which is to be very much in the moment and to go with whatever happens and little things, not mishaps, but little things are different each night and they're not so much mishaps as opportunities to make it different, to find a new engaging point. We feel pretty free with that.

**AH:** Yes and we feel pretty safe with each other. If one of us mucks up the other will pick it up.

**JP:** It has to be that way. There are so much furniture and materials to work with. There are so many things that you might need to literally pick up for someone, other things you might need to hand to someone – adjust.

**MR:** Some actors are egotistical. They seem to be out there to do their own thing.

**JP:** Those actors don't work that much. *Laughter.*

**AH:** Yeah, word gets round. *More laughter.*

**JP:** They just don't get offered the work. Actors like to work with other good people.

**AH:** And directors like to work with actors who are generous. And open. And like to play ... but in a nice way.

**MR:** How did casting come about? How were you chosen for these roles?

**JP:** It came about quite differently for all of us.

**CD:** The play was supposed to happen in September or October last year. But the success of the Roger Hall show which was running at that time meant that they were selling out. The theatre had to take that opportunity to continue to run the Roger Hall. So we were bumped out of our position there late last year and bumped into this one. At that time Jon and I were cast in it.

**AH:** And Jason too – in Wellington.

**JW:** She'd [Lara] seen me in a play where I was playing a geeky guy. It's not my stock acting role. I don't think it is. At all. It's quite an unusual role for me.

**JP:** *Laughing* Yeah, you usually play life guards and fire fighters. *Laughter all round.*

**JW:** I don't play life guards! But I definitely don't play nice guys at all.

**MR:** Murry's not that nice for what it's worth. *A resounding oh and laughter from the cast.*

**CD:** *Laughing* Here we go.

**MR:** No seriously, I don't have a problem with him. But I often get asked by academics, particularly feminists, what I make of him.

**CD:** He's nice in this play though. He's doing his absolute best.

**JP:** And this is not from the time when he [Murry] had any control over her [Mansfield's] material right? So this is not the later stuff. It's just when they're in the middle of an ongoing relationship. And [Jon somewhat incredulous] no one is very old.

**JW:** At Mansfield house they didn't like that I was playing him.

**MR:** Really!?

**JW:** No. I kind of went "we're doing this play" and they were all "great" and I was "great"; they started pulling out all these books. They asked "who are you playing?" and I replied "Middleton Murry" – [Jason mimics their recoil to much laughter].

**CD:** Door shuts!

**JW:** Books go back on the shelf. It's like everything happened in reverse. I'm like "what the ..."

**CD:** Get out, get out!

**JW:** Then we had this conversation about the letters which they [at Mansfield House] felt he'd published against her wishes.

**MR:** That's BS too. As far as I'm concerned if you don't want something published you destroy it.

**JW:** That's right.

**MR:** And she did as much on numerous occasions. And she deliberately left other traces. Very early on she decided that she wanted to leave certain traces of her camping ground. She wanted it out there.

**JW:** And we have a legacy because of it. So that's kind of my argument. Without him doing that – whether he was meant to or not – we want those letters. Otherwise, there's no legacy.

**JP:** So what's the feminist critique? Is it that a guy took control of her? Her material?

**MR:** Yes, it's partly that. And that what he published created a myth which bore very little resemblance to the real Mansfield. He portrayed her as 'this' as opposed to „that'. But I believe that she was „this and that'. She was many things. You can't see something that isn't there. So there are facets of the „real' Mansfield in the Mansfield which he created. I mean, we're all multi-faceted. I'm sure as actors you all show different aspects of your real selves to directors when you're auditioning for various roles and that you may suppress different aspects of your personalities too.

**JP, CD, JW and AH:** Yes, definitely, absolutely.

**MR:** Changing direction a tad, one of aspects of your performance which I really enjoyed and where I feel that you all really excelled was in capturing the individual mannerisms of your characters. And of course I was especially watching you Claire. Even your toe seemed to point just so.

**CD:** *Laughing* My toe?

**MR:** Perhaps you've just spent years doing ballet?

**CD:** *Laughing* Yip!

**MR:** Yes it helps! Your uprightness but also the slight forward stoop. The perching. The fluttering hands.

**JP:** Well we feel that we had a real obligation to make them real people. *Claire agrees*. And the only real criticism we have had levelled at us from certain quarters is that the real people we tried to create in there don't measure up to the idea they have had in their minds of how Katherine and DH might have been.

**MR:** They do. It really works.

**JP:** Well, the point is that no one can really know. Not at this distance. No one really knows.

**AH:** Who said that Jon?

**JP:** *The Listener* reviewer for instance. The woman clearly knows what she knows about Lawrence and Mansfield from their writing. But she's kind of brought an idea of who they would be as people just from their writings which of course is such bullshit.

**MR:** *sighing* Yes, it is and yet, we do.

**JP:** Well she didn't want them to be flawed.

**JW:** I take it she doesn't know what she's talking about? You know what you're talking about?

**MR:** Well I don't know ... it's all about perception isn't it. If she's confidently reviewing then she probably knows a lot more than me?

**JW:** Well I don't think she does.

**JP:** I think she has a preconception of them based on a documentary she saw. Those people don't really exist.

**JW:** I think the only way you can really judge that aspect is if you've studied it as much as a scholar does. You'd recognise a lot of what's been ripped in terms of lines from the short stories and novels? I wouldn't know.

**MR:** I don't believe that. I really feel you got it.

**JP:** That's our job.

**CD:** That's acting. It really is a job.

**JW:** You've only got to play the character with your other actor on stage. Someone will hear a line and go "that's a line from such and such."

**CD:** It's almost detrimental if you are aware of it, perhaps.

**JP:** Yes, because it will feel like a quotation in your mouth.

**CD:** You can only work with the script that you're given and relate with the actors who you are working with. And sure, someone in the audience may recognise a line. But if part of your brain is aware that „this is an important bit and I must do it this way or I must get that”, it could prove detrimental. It could become a bit pongy.

**JW:** In a way we're lucky because there's not too much film evidence of them.

**CD:** Yes, we can't look at them.

**JW:** Yeah, they're not running around on film. That then changes it. There's something kind of magical about it. Perhaps you could cast Lawrence in any shape or form? So Jon's perfect. But if Jon was playing Ali it would be completely different. Because there's all this film footage of Ali, you have to look exactly like Ali; you've got to talk like Ali. Part of the magic of Amy's play is that she lets us in a bit. It's a construction by the director and the actors. Because we don't know exactly. We can't know. *All concur*.

**JP:** There's a handful of iconic photos of you and I [*nods to Claire*] and virtually no publically famous photos of you two (Murry and Frieda). So we're got a lot of leeway.

**AH:** We thought about having a séance.

**MR:** I did too. *We're all laughing*.

**JP:** Oh God; well we have one every fucking night I think.

**MR:** I really did. It was perhaps 4<sup>th</sup> year [at university]. *Jon interjects "tough year?" Ali laughs*. It was like an epiphany. I thought what if I am wrong about this? What if Mansfield didn't see this painting and respond in this way?

**CD:** Exactly, and you thought "I'll just ask her".

**MR:** Uh huh. Then I realised, this is the real world. How would I reference that?

*We then discussed the Mansfield fellowship, Menton and novels amongst other things. The cast found amusing my lack of enthusiasm for novels (by which I meant 21<sup>st</sup> century novels) – a sacrilegious confession from an English graduate. I expressed my preference for short stories.*

**JW:** Well I wondered about this the other day. Mansfield only wrote short stories, right? No novels.

*This made me smile because Jason had unknowingly reiterated Mansfield's exact words (see Notebooks 2:32-33, 22 January 1916).*

**JW:** So I went and bought the short story collection. I haven't read it. But I will at some point. Next holidays I will make Belinda [his partner, a teacher] make me read it. *Emphatically:* I will read it. I did a recording of a story that was loosely based on „At the Bay'. But I read something about Mansfield the other day – that it was the death of the short story from that point onwards, that it's an art form that's lost? It's in the programme. Would you say that's true?

**JP:** *Agreeing* Yes, that in the public mind there's no interest in short story writers. There's no celebration of short story writers. There's no cultural interest anymore?

*Belinda, a keen reader of novels disputes this and points to Patricia Grace (b. 1937). I offer Owen Marshall. But she acknowledges that other than Mansfield's she doesn't enjoy short stories and believes that Mansfield would have written a novel had she lived longer.*

**JP:** The publishing world loves novels.

**JW:** *Disagreeing with Belinda.* I believe not. I believe that she's a different kind of artist.

**MR:** You're right Jason. Her letters and diaries prove this. Initially, she felt she should have written a novel and so she experimented with the form; she waivered but ultimately she realised that the novel couldn't serve her purpose, which was to present impressionistic sketches – fleeting glimpses of her fragmented modern world.

**Belinda:** But doesn't she say that she wanted to write a novel? That the early work was a prelude?

**JW:** I think some writers don't write that way. But maybe in the end she would have felt forced to write a novel? "I've reached this point; I'm a respected writer, now I'll write a novel." *Proof that the cast are really engaging with their subject.*

**CD:** Like it was the next logical step?

**JP:** But short stories are just a completely different art form.

**MR:** Well on that note thank you all very much. I think you've done a fantastic job and it has been a privilege to meet and chat with you.

**AH:** Well thank you. You could have hated it. *Laughing* You could have hated Claire as Mansfield.

**CD:** *Laughing.* Not every role presents this opportunity.

**JP:** Exactly; not every role is this rewarding. Some just don't quite fit.

**AH:** Every role comes with different challenges. Sometimes it's the writing.

**JW:** *Smirking* Sometimes you hate the other actors.

**JP:** *Agreeing* You do!

**JW:** Well, not hate, but you look across the stage and you say "oh for the love of God", could they just stop talking [*Jason's cast mates laugh*] and they just stop talking.

**MR:** I'm worried about seeing you in anything else now.

**JP:** Well you'd better be worried.

**MR:** What's next? *The cast point to the poster behind us for an upcoming show ,Eros'.*

**CD:** *Half-jokingly and self-depreciating* I'm the same in everything.

**AH:** Be very worried about the next one.

**JW:** Yes come to the next one. They're all in the next one.

**CD:** We're the naked people.

**AH:** We're not always naked. *Eyes twinkling* There's no nudity. It's about swinging.

**JP:** If you can handle tonight, you can handle Eros. *More laughter all round.*

**Of interest:**

For more on any of the actors just type their names into Google followed by "actor, New Zealand".

MacGregor holds a Post Grad Diploma in Directing from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney and has directed productions in New York, Sydney and Melbourne. Currently she oversees The Forge at The Court Theatre.

Jon Pheloung's previous projects include *King Kong*. Jason Whyte's television and film credits include *The Insiders Guide To Happiness*, *Avatar* and *Eagle vs Shark*.