

Scholarship supports study of "very" real theatre



Perpetual Guardian Client Manager Brett James and 2017 Noni Wright Postgraduate Scholarship in Theatre Studies recipient Abby Howells.

Abby Howells was “thrilled” to be named as the 2017 Noni Wright Postgraduate Scholarship in Theatre Studies recipient before embarking on her doctoral thesis project with Otago’s Theatre Studies department earlier this year.

Actress and playwright Abby Howells returned to PhD study at Otago in search of a theatrical “place” where people’s stories are accurately portrayed and clichés fear to tread.

Her work, which will culminate with a play on women in prison, will fit within the broad rubric of the “Theatre of the Real” genre, “but not exactly.”

“I don’t want to do a straight documentary theatre play, in which the actor is the medium for transcripts of respondents’ recorded interviews because, as a playwright, I may want to take the story in other creative directions, or introduce fictional elements that help develop the story.”

Although this may go against the purist’s conception of documentary theatre as being free from interpretive elements, Abby researched several plays that successfully integrate fictional elements with interview material.

She was inspired to produce a work that challenges preconceived ideas of “life behind bars” after seeing three recent plays.

“These plays made me realise life in prison – which is closed-off – is often shown using pretty basic stereotypes. Mainstream movies or TV shows often resort to the usual clichés – of the tough yet vulnerable characters, the abusive guards – and it’s often quite sexualised.”

She hopes her narrative, based on interviews with inmates and guards, will accurately represent women prisoners’ experiences.

The widely recognised expertise of Professor Stuart Young and Senior Lecturer Hilary Halba were behind Abby’s move back to Dunedin to study.

“It’s a very strong department and nowhere else does documentary theatre – and this genre combines writing and creative aspects I’m interested in. I’m not sure if I’ll act in, or direct,

the final play but I'm really pleased to be able to focus on writing for three years with the support of great supervisors – it's a fantastic opportunity."



Professor Stuart Young and Senior Lecturer Hilary Halba.

The Noni Wright Scholarship is the only special postgraduate scholarship the Department offers, Professor Stuart Young says.

"It's great because of the prestige it confers."

Professor Young says the last Noni Wright scholarship recipient's project – Emily Duncan's work on Orangapai, the Tuberculosis Sanatorium and Waipiata Borstal site and its inhabitants – led to the Department negotiating a change in [PhD] regulations so that candidates can now include as part of their research and thesis a "Nominated Creative Component" – a play, a novel or other artistic work – as Abby will do.

Theatre of the Real appeals to playwrights like Abby because it punches through rhetoric to convey people's experiences as they were lived; something that's increasingly important in the era of fake news and tweeting presidents, he says.

"I think we're seeing the dawning of an age in which people want credible information, which they often gain through alternative means of expression.

"The commentary around rhetoric in the past two decades shows an increasing awareness of political spin; and there is an interesting tension in our postmodern world, where there are no 'truths', yet there's still something fundamental in us that yearns for truth. There's been an upsurge in documentary theatre worldwide because it can offer a connection with the real stories of the people who the actors are representing."

Documentary theatre practice-as-research represents further growth in the Department's postgraduate numbers, he says.

"When I first started at Otago 11 years ago we only offered a BA degree; while it's taken a while to get some traction we are now proud to have a strong postgraduate cohort."

In her first semester of study Abby also appeared in *My Dad's Boy*, a Fortune Theatre production featuring several Otago alumni.

The Noni Wright Postgraduate Scholarship in Theatre Studies

The Noni Wright Postgraduate Scholarship in Theatre Studies was established by the University Council in association with Perpetual Guardian Trust in 2011 to provide support for Theatre Studies students to pursue postgraduate study. The scholarship was made possible by a generous endowment from the late Mrs Eleanor Wright, to honour the memory of her daughter Noni Wright, who was well known in drama circles, and had appeared on programmes for the BBC. [Read more about Noni Wright here.](#)

The scholarship is administered by Perpetual Guardian.