

## A HISTORY OF THE NEW ZEALAND WRITERS GUILD

### ACT ONE: 1975-1990

By Dean Parker

#### Close To Home

Everybody's memories of how the Guild started are going to be different. If minutes were kept of those early meetings – and it's doubtful if they were – they don't seem to have survived a gypsy life of being shifted around spare rooms and basements and purged in spring-cleanings. I'm not even sure that the Guild can be said to have started in 1975. Initial meetings may have been the year preceding. Formally, the Guild may have been constituted the year following. But what kicked it off certainly occurred in 1975. And that was *Close To Home*.

*Close To Home* was our first soap opera. For the first time, large numbers of writers stood the chance of making a sort of a living from their craft. As individuals, they would be at the whim of television producers and executives. Together they could establish minimum fees and conditions of work. The key figure in initiating meetings of writers to discuss a guild was Michael Noonan. Noonan was a Labour Party activist who'd been script editor on the ground-breaking drama series *Pukemanu* (1971) and was the deviser of *Close To Home*. Associated with Noonan were Wellington writers Julian Dickon, Judy Callingham, Keith Aberdein, and Fiona Kidman. In Auckland, Hamish Keith, who with Julian Dickon had devised *Pukemanu*, was another important figure. Like Noonan, Keith was active in the Labour Party.

Noonan and others in Wellington were members of the NZ branch of PEN, "Poets, Essayists and Novelists", the international writers' body. In New Zealand PEN was associated with lobbying the State Literary Fund and campaigning for a Public Lending Right. Under the aegis of Wellington PEN, a network of playwrights and scriptwriters were invited to a meeting called in Wellington. The aim of the meeting was to set up an organisation which would negotiate an agreement on behalf of writers working in the television and radio industry. Those out of town paid their own way to the meeting. One impoverished Auckland delegate cadged a lift on the overnight truck taking Truth from the Wilson & Horton print plant in Ellerslie down to its Wellington distribution point. The decision was made to call public meetings of writers in Wellington and Auckland. These meetings took place enthusiastically. Resolutions were passed, names and addresses taken, and the show was on the road. It was to be called the NZ Scriptwriters' Guild.

#### A Non-Going Concern

By 1977 the show had almost completely collapsed. Two things had happened. The leadership in Wellington wanted the Guild to be a closed-shop union. That is, there were to be no bludgers – those wanting to write for television and benefit from decent conditions had to join the Guild. Ian Cross and a majority on the PEN Executive were resolutely opposed to this and all support for the Guild from that source ended. On the other hand, Hamish Keith, who was calling the shots in Auckland, wanted the Guild to be a professional body of professional people with the fees set accordingly – \$100 a year, extraordinarily high for the time, and certainly beyond the pockets of most writers.

The result was that when trouble blew up in Auckland in 1977, and writers turned to the Guild for help, all that was there was a moribund organisation which was found to have only one financial member, Keith Aberdein. Again, it was a soap opera that had brought writers together – *A Going Concern*, on the new Auckland-based SPTV channel (now TV2).

Keith Aberdein, always staunch, took it upon himself to come up to Auckland to help sort out the problems and impress everyone with the revelation that he was an Old Boy of the same school that had produced Samuel Beckett. The problems – discontent about the writing process – were resolved and the soap's writers, people like Jan Farr, David Hughes, Ken Catran, became key figures in an energetic Auckland branch. Prodded by Auckland, Wellington called a series of re-organisation meetings. With PEN quite out

of the picture and no money in the bank, these meetings took place in Michael Noonan's living room. Auckland delegates again paid their own way down, travelling by overnight train and collapsing in spare bunks in spare rooms around town. Roger Hall was at these meetings, as were two union activists from the Wellington PSA, Jane Galletly and Earle Spencer who had jointly written the excellent 1976 television drama series Moynihan, about a carpenters' union. Judith Holloway was another in the mix.

### **In Our Thrall**

If the Guild was to thrive, it had to produce the goods for its members. It had to win improvements in fees and conditions on TV and radio, the principal income-earners for local scriptwriters. But to do this it had to get the BCNZ, the Broadcasting Council of NZ, to the negotiating table and the BCNZ could decline to do this if the Guild was "un-representative", if it didn't cover most writers. Having learnt its lesson, the re-organised Guild set the membership fee dead low, made the most prominent playwright in the country -- Bruce Mason -- president and commenced a membership drive. The demand for a closed-shop union was put on the permanent back-burner as the Guild set about winning members by argument and results rather than decree.

The following year, 1978, a negotiating team led by Michael Noonan brought the Guild its first industrial documents. These were national awards covering fees and conditions for writing for television and radio. The night before negotiations, the team met at Bruce Mason's to plan its strategy. One member had rung round various unions to establish what was considered an average income. This figure was then divided by the number of hours of original drama a writer should expect to turn out in a year (fortunately, the Head of Drama at Avalon had made such a pronouncement). This proved a simple but extremely effective means of establishing a base rate. The president of the Guild suggested an interesting gambit. He had just been made an honorary doctor of letters by the University of Waikato. He believed that if, throughout the negotiations, he was addressed as "Doctor", the Guild "would hold the BCNZ in our thrall". He must have been on to something, as the negotiations went extraordinarily well. The going rate for television drama was doubled – possibly the biggest increase in hourly rates won by any NZ union. Percentages were negotiated for repeat rights and overseas sales. Some of the percentages and residuals were less than the Guild wanted, but this was peanuts compared to the spectacular increase in the base rate. On radio, bizarre anomalies were rationalised and fees given substantial hikes.

In the course of negotiations the BCNZ demanded a lower base rate for adaptations, claiming adaptations were "easier work" which should be paid less. The Guild vigorously rejected this until the president of the Guild, awakening from a gentle snooze, declared that BCNZ had a point, that on one recent adaptation commission he'd found he could lift whole sections of dialogue from the source material. The leader of the Guild team called for an immediate recess, took the president into a spare room for a short, sharp exchange and on return the president told the BCNZ he had in fact erred and that adaptation required skills more than comparable to those needed to churn out mere original pieces. At the start of the first day of negotiations news had come through that police in Auckland were moving to clear Maori land protestors off Takaparawha, Bastion Point. During a break the Guild negotiating team sent a telegram to the Bastion Point protestors condemning the police action and strongly expressing solidarity with those being arrested.

### **The NZ Rioters Guild**

In 1979 the Guild joined the Federation of Labour (now the Council of Trade Unions). FOL secretary Jim Knox enquired exactly what it was Guild members did and when told, "They write", responded that all scribblers should be in the Clerical Workers' Union. In 1980 Guild delegate Jan Farr seconded the successful motion at the FOL Conference for an FOL Working Women's Charter. If Wellington's Michael Noonan was the Guild's founding father, the founding mother was definitely Auckland's Jan Farr. Following the Guild's acceptance into the FOL, the Guild joined the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds and shortened its name to the NZ Writers Guild. Round about this time the then Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, bent on some sort of show-down with a very successful and forceful union movement, released a list of names of union secretaries who were members of the Socialist Unity Party, and, by dint, traitors. One of those named was the national secretary of the Writer's Guild. Besides the personal suffering involved, the Guild also lost out financially as a result. It was an extraordinary climate of venom

and it was a brave president of the Guild, Peter Harcourt, who stood up at the Feltex TV Awards that year and ringingly declared he was proud to be a member of the Guild.

In 1981, following the Springboks' Tour, the secretary of the Auckland branch of the Guild was sentenced to six months' jail for putting an axe through a cable at a transmitter station relaying the televised Third Test to South Africa. After a couple of days inside, the secretary was released on appeal. He was subsequently approached by highly amused members of the Wellington branch to stand as president. He declined, saying he would find it difficult to chair meetings from the confines of the slammer and it wasn't a good idea to have the Writers Guild become known as the Rioters Guild. The Wellington membership demurred and enthusiastically declared that dealings with television programme-makers and broadcasters would be immeasurably improved if the Guild was seen to promote members prepared to put an axe through transmission cables. The Court of Appeal eventually and mercifully quashed the prison sentence and replaced it with one of 180 hours community service, which the secretary dutifully worked off -- for the Guild.

### **Strike Threat**

Fees for various television writing jobs all came back to the "base rate" -- the minimum fee paid for writing thirty minutes or one-hour of drama. In a moment of inspiration Jane Galletly added up the fees paid to story-liners and dialogue writers working on any given episode of the daily bread-winner, *Close To Home*, and found it was less than this "base rate". So, argued Galletly, who's pocketing the difference? The Guild demanded the total writing fee for *Close To Home* be no different than the minimum base drama rate. TVNZ (which the BCNZ had now become) refused to acknowledge the Guild's logic.

Meetings to discuss the grievance were held in Auckland and Wellington. Auckland favoured an immediate strike but Wellington accepted a motion from Guild member Rosemary McLeod that the matter be arbitrated. The Guild and TVNZ argued their respective cases before an industrial arbitrator from the Dept of Labour. The arbitration took place at the Avalon studio complex. During a recess, TVNZ representatives asked if the arbitrator would like to be shown the studios and meet the glamorous casts of various shows. The Guild leapt up and demanded the arbitrator not be taken anywhere by any honey-tongued TVNZ executive unless a Guild representative accompanied him. The hearings were completed, the arbitrator went away to ruminate and, as expected, brought down a ruling in favour of the Guild. The base rate had to be applied to soap opera as it did to everything else. The arbitrator also accepted a further Guild demand, that the deviser of *Close To Home* be paid a residual for every episode.

### **Auckland - Wellington**

The Auckland (northern) branch was a live-wire, if unwieldy, operation. An agenda was mailed out to all members and then discussed by whoever turned up at the monthly meetings and a vote of those present decided all matters. It produced some interesting results. In 1984 the branch voted to send a relatively large donation to the British Miners' Union who were engaged in a dramatic battle with the government of Margaret Thatcher. At another Auckland branch meeting an article in the Australian Writers' Guild newsletter was circulated. The article, by an AWG gadfly, claimed that Australia was so awash with money for new filmscripts, writers were losing all sense of standards and their work was corrupt. Prominent Guild member Ken Catran then offered to be sent to Australia at Guild expense to expose himself to the cancerous lucre and report back. The importance of a national newsletter had become clear, though the practicalities a trifle vague. The Auckland and Wellington (southern) branches took turns producing the newsletter but production soon became sporadic.

The head office of the Guild went wherever the national secretary lived. This alternated between Auckland and Wellington. The Auckland Guild had an organisational advantage. Unlike Wellington, it had a permanent office which it shared with Actors' Equity in the Trade Union Centre on Great North Rd. This allowed the Guild access to a conference room for meetings. Organisationally, the Guild remained weak in the South Island. Nothing got off the ground in Dunedin and although attempts were made to build a branch in Christchurch (where A K Grant and subsequently Sue McCauley were active), it rarely met. The two main centres of Guild activity remained Wellington and Auckland and relations between the two

contained an inevitable amount of friction. At one meeting of the Board of the Film and Television Awards Society in Wellington, in front of astonished Board members, the Guild representative from Auckland (the branch secretary) asked the Guild representative from Wellington (the national secretary) to step outside so he could beat his bloody brains out. In Auckland, Peter Davis had become a significant figure. Also active were Norelle Scott, Neil Illingworth, Grant Morris, and Peter Hill. In Wellington, Roger Page and then John Smythe were putting in long hours for the Guild.

## Radio, Theatre, Film

The industrial award with BCNZ/TVNZ/RNZ was re-negotiated regularly and became a major organising tool for the Guild. As the award round approached, intensive branch meetings would take place as members made their input into the make-up of the new document. Considerable debate took place around TVNZ's desire to have a single buy-out rate that subsumed all repeat and overseas sales residuals. The argument about money-up-front being worth more than two birds in the bush was always balanced by the legendary amount (close on six figures) Ken Catran was rumoured to have collected in overseas residuals from *Hanlon*.

The Guild fought against the running-down of radio drama with some initial success – but the success proved only temporary. The formation of an Association of Community Theatres, representing the major theatre producers, gave the Guild the opportunity to negotiate a standard contract for playwrights. A draft contract was drawn up by Greg McGee and, with the support of Playmarket, successfully put in place. A dispute over a Guild member being blacked from using the Maidment Theatre in Auckland proved the Guild's efficacy in aligning itself with a bit of industrial muscle. Whereas all an organisation like PEN could do was issue a statement decrying the black-listing, the Guild contacted other unions who threatened to black out the theatre. The ban on the Guild member was lifted.

A film industry, based on tax breaks, was flourishing. The Guild was used to dealing with a central body representing employers and was less involved in individual film contracts, acting more as a clearing-shop for information on what producers were paying and what they expected for it. The Guild's membership of the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds, with its black-list threat, did cause a couple of tardy local producers to pay up on monies owed to writers. Other problems for film screenwriters were credits and the number of drafts being required by producers.

In the mid-'80s the Guild had the honour of hosting the annual convention of the International Affiliation of Writers' Guilds. The convention took place in Wellington but was preceded by an initial reception in Auckland. One Auckland executive member volunteered to be among those who would drive out to the airport to pick up the international guests. His offer was vetoed by the Wellington organisers, it being thought the executive member's unwarranted 1963 Hillman Minx would prove too much of a shock for the arriving Americans. The convention in Wellington was a tremendous success, greatly enhanced by the presence of the long-serving president of the Australian Writers' Guild, playwright David Williamson. In 1988 the Guild was presented with a plaque from the American Writers' Guilds East and West commemorating New Zealand's "steadfast support" of their American colleagues during the big screenwriters' strike of May – August that year.

## The Down-Turn

Television remained the most important recruiting area for the Guild. Most scriptwriters were now earning the major portion of their income from writing for the box. But the Lange-Douglas Labour government had just de-regulated television and the Guild was faced with a critical new challenge. Instead of having to deal with the one employer body – TVNZ – the Guild found all television drama and documentaries were now being produced by independent production houses, seemingly free to draw up their own little in-house contracts. At the same time that the Guild faced this alarming strain on its resources, the Labour government was enacting new industrial legislation making membership of 1000 the minimum for a union. The consequence of all this was that a series of meetings took place in the Auckland branch to discuss some form of amalgamation with other organisations. Those who argued for amalgamation were not so much swayed by government legislation as by a number of sombre realities facing the Guild. The Guild

had about 150-200 members paying relatively low fees. There were no assets, little money in the bank. All Guild officers were unpaid volunteers. The Auckland branch was being held together by one or two people while the Wellington branch was badly run down, rarely meeting. There was no South Island organisation. The Registrar of Incorporated Societies was sending polite notices that he hadn't seen a record of accounts for some time. Clearly this couldn't continue. One solution would be for the Guild to become an affiliate of a larger union and take advantage of economies of scale (a course taken by Actors' Equity). An alternative was to broaden the Guild base -- amalgamate with PEN, which was in the process of becoming the Society of Authors, and maybe take on board free-lance journalists.

Some enquiries were made in both directions, but the great majority of members were opposed to any affiliation or amalgamation, arguing that the Guild would either lose its identity and then its members, or weaken its focus. Nothing came of the debate and Labour's legislation passed into history with its government. But the realities remained. There was no money in the bank. Membership was, at best, static. Morale was low, the volunteers

exhausted. The national awards we had all fought so hard for, while still providing the basis for new contracts, were, legally, worthless pieces of paper. Somehow, as it faced the 1990s and an unsympathetic government, the Guild had to re-shape itself.

## **ACT TWO: 1990-1994**

**By Judy Callingham**

### **Re-Invention is the Mother of Necessity**

This was a short act in the Guild's history, but it was a significant one. By the end of 1994 the New Zealand Writers Guild had morphed into quite a different animal.

In 1990 the National Office of the NZWG moved to Auckland. It sounds a lot grander than it was. What arrived in fact was few boxes of records, some unaudited accounts and insufficient money to get the Guild through to the end of the year.

This wasn't surprising. The Guild had always existed pretty much hand to mouth. In 1990 only a handful of members remained and some of them hadn't paid their subs in years. The energies and resources of the Guild had for a long time been focussed on the industry-wide battle for quotas on television. Sadly it was a lost cause.

But while it was being fought, TVNZ quietly created South Pacific Pictures as its drama arm and slipped out from under the agreement the Guild had worked so hard to negotiate and protect. More than one lawyer has suggested that, since SPP was a wholly-owned subsidiary company, a legal challenge from the Guild might have seen us retain our rights and, more particularly, our royalties. Somehow in the early days we had managed to negotiate a royalties clause that was the envy of every other Writers Guild – 7.5% of the gross on all overseas sales. *Gloss* was the about last drama series that brought in residuals - large cheques from Britain and very small ones from the likes of Zimbabwe. *Shortland Street* writers, lament. You'd have had luxury holidays for the last dozen years.

So it was a toothless little tiger, on the television front at least, that took up residence in a dark cubby-hole in the Grey Lynn CTU building. But the Guild's financial state at least was to change in short order.

I'd like to rewrite history and claim that this financial coup was a noble attempt to save the Guild from extinction. The truth is that, prior to the change-over, the Auckland branch decided it was time we held a rip-roaring party, and there just wasn't enough money in its kitty. Ken Catran suggested there might be a few wannabes who'd pay to listen to our wisdom on the subject of writing for television. This was timely, since there was shortly to be a new soap opera and therefore regular work. We ran a seminar in the conference centre at Auckland University. With bare-face gall we even solicited financial assistance. The NZFC chipped in \$3000, NZ on Air donated a couple of full-page ads in the Listener and the registrations

poured in. At the two-day seminar there were even people sitting on the stairs. From a balance of near zero we suddenly had over \$20,000 in the bank.

We also had an influx of new members – most of the people who attended the seminar joined the Guild. It wasn't long before membership was into three figures again.

And along with these members came a new burst of energy and determination.

The independent producers were as united as they've ever managed to be in refusing to recognise the Guild. A mini-breakthrough came when we persuaded SPP come to the table where we successfully argued for a change to their proposed contract for Shortland Street dialogue writers. It was small, but it was significant. For the first time since the demise of our agreement with TVNZ the Guild was acknowledged as a negotiating body for writers.

The Guild was well-served by its board members during this period. Busy writers like David Hughes, Dean Parker, Greg McGee, Hester Joyce and Norelle Scott worked tirelessly for the organisation. And with only a few hours a week of office assistance, it was the members who effectively ran the Guild.

It seemed like a golden time for writers. For a short period we had not one, but two soaps and a long running series on air. Writers were not only employed, but in short supply. One night a week you could watch two-and-a-half hours of New Zealand drama back to back - *Shortland Street*, *Homeward Bound* and then straight on to *Marlin Bay*. It would have gone on longer, but the new commissioning editor at TV3 decided to kill the lion cubs and a further 30 commissioned and funded episodes of *Homeward Bound* were ditched. Interesting, isn't it, how history repeats itself?

In the early '90s the Guild became more active internationally.

The 1990 meeting of the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds was held in Wellington, and the delegates sent a letter to Prime Minister Jim Bolger decrying new legislation that allowed our broadcasting services to be bought by foreign interests. The death of Britain's executive director meant that the 1991 IAWG meeting was cancelled, however, it reconvened the following year.

At the meeting in New York in 1992 the NZWG president, New Zealand's sole delegate, was invited to join the IAWG Policy and Research Group, the policy and power base of the organisation which meets three times a year. New Zealand has had a member on that committee ever since.

This international connection is of immense value to the New Zealand guild. The IAWG is a powerful body. The Writers Guild of America can bring the movie industry grinding to a halt, and in the '80s it did so. The support and backing of our international affiliates has helped us through some difficult times. And this support has been generous. The WGAw has paid for international airfares and accommodation for PRG meetings, it has given substantial funding to assist its tiny New Zealand colleague to grow and it has always been a kind and generous host.

Our overseas affiliates were appalled by the Employment Contracts Act that broke the power of the unions. So appalled in fact that they contributed money to enable our Executive Director, Philippa Boyens, to work for the Guild full-time

Our newly full-time ED helped the NZWG to grow in many directions. The script registration service was established, Malcolm Black provided legal advice for both the guild and its members, seminars and craft evenings offered training and fresh ideas to writers. Over many difficult months we negotiated a set of contract guidelines with SPADA.

Philippa has now gone on to greater things, and in the years to come the NZWG was to do the same.

## **ACT THREE: 1995- 2000**

**By Kathryn Burnett**

### **Fax, Lies and Videotape**

This was a period of extraordinary growth for the Guild. During her three and a half years as the Executive Director, Philippa Boyens changed the face of the Guild significantly. By 1995 the Guild had a new membership database, a registration service and an information pamphlet. Regular craft evenings were re-established and a number of writing seminars were held: including a lecture from award-winning screenwriter Andrew Davies, a business seminar for writers, and a two-day workshop with US script guru Linda Seger. Not too shabby for a tiny cash-poor organization. Hardly surprisingly this rush of new activity attracted more members. Over 1995 the membership rose steadily to 278.

Improving work conditions for writers remained the Guild's principle goal and proved to be as challenging as ever. The Guild had long attempted to negotiate standard rates and practices with the Independent Producers and Directors Guild (The organization was soon to morph into SPADA) with little success. However as the Guild blossomed, the IPDG realized that not having some kind of guidelines was working against its members instead for them. Thus Philippa and the board managed to negotiate a booklet proudly titled *Guidelines For Writers and Producers*. This booklet had originated out of the Guild's desire for Model Contracts and Agreements but given the IPDG's resistance to anything even resembling minimum rates agreements – this was no mean

achievement. It was the first such document to exist in New Zealand since the loss of the TVNZ/NZWG Standard Writers Agreement.

Philippa also established the production of a regular newsletter – a photocopied tome filled with articles generously provided by any member she could convince to write one. She also established the tradition of gratefully using SPP's photocopier to produce the beast – a long and delightful task that has been since enjoyed by myself, various board members, Paddy Compter, and Dominic Sheehan – but more of those two later.

1995 was also significant in that it saw the Guild undertake its first official credit arbitration – a valuable industry service the Guild still performs despite some producers still not really understanding what it is.

Another achievement during this time was the lobbying of the NZFC to elect a writer to the NZFC board. Quite extraordinary that lobbying was required given the role of writers in the filmmaking process but hey, the Guild wasn't complaining – this success also opened up further opportunities for dialogue between the two organisations.

And on top of all of this the Guild still managed to find time to upgrade its rather meagre resource library, which consisted at the time of a rather paltry set of screenwriting books, a few scripts and a couple of videos from the Australian Film Television and Radio School.

By the end of 1996 the Guild membership was up to 370 and the organization had initiated discussions with the NZFC for underwriting of the Guild's core activities.

The successful culmination of these discussions in 1997 resulted in an ongoing funding relationship with the NZFC, which would ensure the Guild's continued survival at least in the interim.

Halfway through 1997, Philippa resigned and approached me about taking on her role. In true literary/fairytale tradition she asked three times before I agreed. She is nothing if not tenacious and as a result of that tenacity I ended up in one of the most rewarding jobs I've ever had.

When I first joined the Guild in 1996, Philippa was working out of a windowless cupboard that would have given OSH conniptions. So my agreement to take on the role hinged on a move to a slightly larger cupboard with a window. But new office aside I really had no idea what I'd taken on until I was doing it. Suddenly I was supposed to have an intimate knowledge of copyright law, broadcasting policies,

databases, and the personal writing histories of over 300 members. And all of this compounded by the nagging fear that I would bankrupt the Guild in my first month – because it wouldn't have taken very much.

The Guild was also about to host the John Sayles Seminar and it quickly became apparent that this wasn't a one person job and we would definitely need a two person cupboard at some point. Not to mention the unheard of luxury of a fax machine and an email address. The Sayles event proved to be a fantastic profile enhancing event for the Guild. The securing of the independent filmmaker and his producer partner Maggie Renzi had been secured by President Greg McGee and Philippa at some point in 1996 but the grunt work of organising and publicising a film preview of *Men With Guns*, post screening party, a one day seminar, and an industry masterclass fell to me and Paddy Compter.

It was a mildly terrifying undertaking at the time but a learning curve that stood both Paddy and I in good stead for the events that were to come. And in fact for just about anything we might ever choose to do in the future. We coped remarkably well when the print of *Men With Guns* got lost somewhere between Germany and South America a week before the screening. But it took nerves of steel to stand outside Auckland International airport at 6am and watch our jet-lagged head-lining guests roar off in a SUV on the wrong side of the road. "Oh." Said Greg, revealing a penchant for understatement. "I hope they'll be alright."

Over this period the Guild continued to be dogged by money worries. The more we tried to offer our burgeoning membership the more it cost. Thus we doubled the registration fees, increased fees, started charging the non-members sneaking into craft evenings, and started a membership drive. We also started quietly promoting the Guild at events such as the International Film Festival, and Writers Festival, not to mention tertiary institutions.

Over the next three years we organized seminars with Herschel Weingrod/Andrew Horton, Australian comedy writer Andrew Bigguns, Australian screenwriters Louis Nowra and Jan Sardi, acclaimed playwright Roger Hall

and Writer/Director Andrew Bancroft who ran a series of successful courses for beginners. We ran also convinced the Auckland City Council to give us \$5000 to beef up our library.

Industry achievements included commissioning a research project into writers rates (so we could publish a list of recent industry rates and quash dark mutterings that we just made them up), negotiated a Letter Of Intent document with SPADA to be used by writers and producers to cover the period before optioning, and becoming an active participant in the Local Content Lobby – which included having board member Paula Jones representing us on the board of trustees. Guild representation in the form of Judy Callingham on the NZFTA board successfully secured three awards for writers. We also published a Writers Directory for industry use and we moved a lot. From Richmond Road to College Hill and then to Ponsonby Road where blowflies and rats battled for supremacy in the stairwell.

By mid 1999 our membership had risen to 430, we had a website, we'd convinced the NZFC to increase their core funding and we had a new president. Guild stalwart Greg McGee had finally thrown in the towel and was replaced by Alannah O'Sullivan who had been a long standing board member. Some people cite exhaustion for Greg's departure from the presidential position but I know it was really my insensitivity that pushed him over the edge. We were going through customs at LAX on route to the 1998 IAWG meeting in Canada. When we'd finished being questioned the customs officer said he hoped that my father and I would enjoy our stay. A more politic person might have set the officer straight but I was too busy laughing.

1999 was an intensely political year as the Guild worked alongside other industry organisations to make broadcasting policy and arts funding an election issue – and it worked - at the very least people were talking about arts related issues. We also listened with keen interest as Labour promised to review the Employment Contracts Act which had over the last 9 years had restricted the Guild's ability to negotiate a Minimum Basic Agreement – something all other English speaking industries benefit from. Meanwhile our CTU reps Dean Parker and Ramsay Margolis were keeping the CTU apprised of the policy issues that affected writers and importantly drew their attention to the problems faced by creative workers.

Dean's long held relationship with the CTU had given the guild a quiet ally over the years and it was Dean's work that created a base for Dominic to work productively with the CTU in the years to come.

1999 was also the year Paddy left for greener pastures and was replaced by Dominic Sheehan. I promised him it would be temporary and he still hasn't forgiven me.

But perhaps the most significant work undertaken by the Guild executive during 1999 was the drafting of model contracts in association with law firm Baldwin, Shelston Waters. In agreement with SPADA Executive Director Jane Wrightson, we planned to present the contracts to the SPADA board in the hope that they would enter into negotiations with us. Not surprisingly SPADA hated our first draft – but despite the ill-disguised antagonism during that first meeting, I was grateful that they'd come to the table to discuss the contracts at all. Negotiations started in 2000 and were completed the following year – a process ably helmed by President Alannah O'Sullivan.

So all in all a stressful, eventful time but an exciting couple of years that raised the Guild's profile and saw it establish and re-establish important relationships throughout the industry both here and overseas. This was a solid foundation that would soon be built on by Susy Pointon and Dominic Sheehan.

## **ACT FOUR: 2001-2005**

### **By Dominic Sheehan**

#### **Pakn'Slave**

2001 was the Year of the Foundation. The year before, while battling funding ideas back and forth with the newly ex-ED Kathryn Burnett, I joked that we should set up our own Writers Guild Foundation, along the lines of that run by the Writers Guild of America. What I had been intended as one of those throwaway ideas that is so ridiculous you think it will never fly (the sort of idea you learn not to repress around the writing table of a sitcom – see *Melody Rules* WAS good for something!) found support, not only with new Executive Director Susy Pointon but with the entire Guild Board. The purpose of the Foundation would be to improve development opportunities



for local screenwriters. Susy and I approached the New Zealand Film Commission with the idea. They had also been grappling with the issue of writer development and thus the New Zealand Writers Foundation was born.

The additional core funding provided by the Commission enabled the Guild/Foundation to move to 243 Ponsonby Rd in January 2001. For the first time in its history the Guild was not a sub-tenant – but an actual tenant! Our new residence was formerly occupied by a sewing service and for at least a year people would wander in holding garments they expected to be fixed. Susy suggested we make some extra cash by offering a while-you-wait alteration service – and hopefully sign up new members while the customers waited. We were also now able to rent a photocopies, negating the need to trek out to west Auckland to do battle with the SPP-copybeast.

The additional money also meant that Susy and myself were able to go full-time, or at least be PAID for full-time work. Prior to this, all Guild employees had been paid for 30 hours but actually worked many more. To cope with the extra worked we added Dara McNaught (Manager - Membership Services) and Angela Zivkovic (Programme Director) to the staff.

The Foundation's first year was an ambitious one – workshops, seminars and the inaugural New Zealand Screenwriters Laboratory. We launched the Foundation at Rannoch, the gothic mansion owned by arts patron, businessman and Foundation patron James Wallace. Another Foundation patron Jane Campion surprised us all during her speech by pledging \$150,000 of her time to the Foundation – something we're still to cash in on. Jane, if you're reading you might want to contact the office...

Seminars and workshops followed, including ones from international presenters, which gave some of us here our first taste of 'the trying overseas guest'. The runner assigned to assist one diva-ish visitor recalls

a mad dash around Auckland trying to find the 'appropriate' (ie. expensive and difficult to find) menu Ms Thing had 'requested' (ie. demanded). Time and money being short the runner made a visit to the local Pak'n'Save and removed all evidence of packaging. Scientific tests revealed that one out of one prickly writing gurus think that 'free range organic chicken' and 'Pak'n'Save deli chicken' taste the same.

The Laboratory was held in February 2002 and ended an exhausting first twelve months for the Foundation. Exhausting because at the same time we were also continuing the run the Guild. In 2001 the negotiation of the Model Contracts continued unabated – myself, Kathryn Burnett and Judy Callingham formed the Guild's negotiation team – overseen by Susy and Alannah. The contracts would finally be released into the wild later that year and remain a stunning achievement.

With all these high profile seminars and the advent of free contracts the Guild's membership swelled to around 550, a level that has been maintained ever since.

Susy Pointon left in February 2002 and I took over the Executive Director role. Alannah O'Sullivan also stepped down and Denis Edwards stepped up, providing a bolt of testosterone to the management of the Guild. Our immediate goal was to put those elusive minimum agreements back front and centre. An example agreement was drafted and christened – it was to be officially referred to as an IMA – Industry Minimums Agreement.

Unlike the heady days of minimum agreements in the 1980s the Guild was faced with a very different bargaining environment. Since then the industry players had fractured and instead of negotiating with simply TVNZ we were faced with a myriad of companies and independents. Further, the newly passed Employment Relations Act did not cover contractors – meaning we could not use this agreement to compel any employer to the bargaining table, let alone expect them to reach an agreement. Despite this we approached SPADA. While we knew they would not welcome being tied to minimum rates and conditions, we hoped they would see sense in negotiating this agreement with us. They didn't and the IMA remains MIA - but watch this space (he said enigmatically...).

While our industrial negotiations were proving elusive, the Guild itself continued to expand its service base. Early 2002 saw the advent of the *E-News*, our electronic bi-weekly newsletter. Credit for the *E-News* must ultimately go the Writers Guild of Great Britain – we stole the idea from them but as every intellectual property lawyer knows, there's no copyright in an idea. The library had also continued to grow – one shelf had become three had become an entire cupboard. It now spans two very full cupboards.

Meanwhile at the Foundation...in-between running script read through workshops and running seminar series by the likes of Arista and Linda Aronson, negotiations got underway with the Commission for a second Laboratory

and it took many months to finalise the conditions. The main issue with the Laboratory is that it is required to serve the needs of both the partners in the Foundation – the Guild (who want an anonymous process where the writer is able to relax and focus on the script) and the Commission (who want scripts they can put into production). And while the two organisations didn't always have the same opinion as to how the thing should be run, we did always keep talking and ultimately a set of conditions acceptable to both partners was agreed upon. The second Laboratory eventually took place in December 2003 and was another great success – largely because of the work of Angela Zivkovic whose efforts were nothing short of superhuman.

During all this time the Guild continued its attendance at international conferences. I could relate some of what took place around the table over these years but it's the behind the scenes happenings that are far more interesting. For example, Guild President Alannah O'Sullivan and myself flew into New York exactly one month after 9/11 for the 2001 meeting. The office at the Writers Guild of America East, is smack in the neighbour of various news networks and one, based right next door to WGAE, received anthrax laden letters while we were there. There's nothing like experiencing history close up and personal!

Compared to the Guild's earlier history, the last couple of years seem rather uneventful to me. I'd describe them as a time of consolidation. After so much growth, two Laboratories, all that *E-News* formatting (believe me, it doesn't get to look so pretty all by itself!) and Pakn'Save chicken we could be forgiven for

wanting to take a breather and simply flex some of our new-found influence. 2003 saw the Foundation work to build upon its promise and, with its focus on up-skilling, has been a major contributor to the rise of development culture in New Zealand. The Guild continued to be the voice of writers, commenting on everything from the composition of the Screen Council board to the lack of dramas on the screens of TVNZ. During that time we also increased our involvement in the CTU and are still proud to be the only independent arts union in New Zealand (though hopefully soon joined by Actors Equity). Surviving in an unfriendly industrial environment (no quota or minimum agreements to use as a stick) has meant we've needed to become diplomats while still performing the work of a union – not always an easy balancing act.

Denis Edwards stepped down in early 2004 and was replaced by Frances Edmond. Pressure on membership services encouraged us to employ Jane Bissell and Marj Noble joined us later in the year as our new Treasurer. Last year we also completed another major review of writing rates. We were dismayed to see that rates had actually stayed the same or decreased slightly right across the board. And producers think there's no reason for a minimum agreement! What other profession actually pays less than it did in 1998?

However, on a brighter note 2004 was also the year that three of our members won Oscars. Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens put New Zealand screenwriting on the map with their Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar for *LOTR: Return of the King* not to mention a BAFTA and about a billion other international awards. There is nothing like seeing great talent rewarded – especially when that talent is local.

In early 2005 Dominic Sheehan chose to leave and was replaced by Penny Ehrhardt who chose to leave and was replaced by Dominic Sheehan. The Foundation moved towards greater independence. The Guild turns the big 3-oh. Time to look back and forward.

Thanks to everyone for making it such an eventful thirty years. And beware of writers bearing axes. Or chicken.