Political theatre in New Zealand is something of a no-no. The "regular" commercial theatre companies find that, on the whole, politics doesn't mix with business and that they must, after all, consider their business interests first. Independent (political) theatre troupes, on the other hand, are few and far between.

The best known and longest established of these is Red Mole which has gone through a number of — always interesting — permutations over the years. Its politics might be described as "poetic anarchism", though always with ideological eggshells of the New Zealand middle class still firmly attached to its bottom.

The most political troupe of recent years has been Maranga Mai (rise up) which last year drew on its head the wrath of many establishment groups, including the New Zealand government and sections of the press, allegedly for causing "racial disharmony". Most of the troupe's members are Maoris and have had a personal history of involvement in the Maori land rights struggle — the Maori land march of 1975, the Bastion Point occupation of 1977/78 — and their theatre is, therefore, more than a mere stage show. It is a crystallisation of their own experiences, of their own encounters with Pakeha, that is, white (in)justice, coupled with an historical awareness of the injustices perpetrated upon Maoridom.

What roused the authorities' ire most was Maranga Mai's audacity to perform on stage a court scene which, in its blatant disregard for the right of the Maori, forms a common and everyday experience within the Maori and Polynesian communities. In spite of its adverse publicity, the emergence of Maranga Mai must rank as one of the most significant developments in Maori/political theatre here.

Stage work, like cartooning, reaps its rewards instantly; and I'm afraid that after a decade of journalism the researching and writing of newspaper articles had lost some of its glamour for me. I was keen to try new ways of putting my skills to use. I had begun, in 1979, to perform poetry (not my own) within a rock environment, with rewarding audience reactions from mostly younger people whose main interests were probably neither in poetry nor in politics.

Another quite political and fun-to-watch act has recently been added to this list by the combination of Slick Stage (an acting duo) and the Top Twins (a singing twosome) into the country's finest little touring company.

Early in 1980 I gathered an impromptu group to perform a lengthy poem by Ernesto Cardenal, outlining the history of the Sandinista movement, for a Nicaragua
The cast of Komikabaret. The author, Tom Appleton, is second from the left.
solidarity evening. Again, the audience reaction was encouraging. I thought it might be worthwhile to try something like this on a larger scale, in a proper theatrical setting, and to form a real political theatre troupe for this purpose.

As I have always been partial to the writings of Bertolt Brecht, it seemed natural to try and put together a show of unusual Brecht material. My original idea was to grab as many political poems and songs as would fit and slap them on the stage as In Praise of Communism (which is the title of a well-known little poem of Brecht’s). This was generally considered, by everyone I spoke to, as a "good joke". The consensus opinion was that nobody would come, except maybe a handful of communists.

Eventually, we found a title which, while more opaque, would retain enough bite and would set people wondering what it might all be about: If Sharks Were People (after one of Brecht’s short parables).

However, performing Brecht who has been dead these 25 years, proved to be no easy matter. First, the government’s art funding bodies showed no inclination to fund a commie theatre. This meant that we had to make do with our own money, and use as little of it as possible. Even so the production finally cost several hundred dollars.

Next, droves of hangers-on, attracted by some misperception which adheres to Brecht’s name (chiefly on account of the frivolous whorehouse songs from his Threepenny Opera and suchlike) came and went from one rehearsal to the next. Worse, some stayed for a fair while and then left, making things unexpectedly difficult.

Copyright holders for Brecht’s songs and poems, scattered all over the world, presumably felt that New Zealand audiences, consisting of penguins and bushmen, did not deserve to see a Brecht performance and so either did not reply or they replied by surface mail or they made difficult stipulations -- thus dragging a process, which should have taken only weeks, into months. Music for many songs could not be obtained. Many of the translations turned out to be way off beam, while many of Brecht’s most political poems were not available in translation.

Finding a theatre for the performance became a nightmare, as did the rehearsals. Those people who stayed -- seven in all -- held down jobs during the day. Rehearsing on two evenings of the week and on every weekend for several months on end became a real drag.

At last, however, in November of last year, we performed our show in Wellington’s off-off Bats Theatre, a musty little place perfectly suited for a production of Hamilton Deane’s Dracula play. But while Sharks wasn’t the greatest show on earth, we did manage to fill every seat in the house (and including the aisle) with it on every night we played.

We found that much of Brecht’s purely political poetry was either too didactic or too heavy. We tried, therefore, to arrive at the political statements by degrees, and made an effort to squeeze as many laughs from the most unlikely lines as possible. We started with a new version of the familiar ballad of Mack the Knife and gradually worked our way to the end, a new version of the Solidarity Song. It was hoped that the audience would go through some sort of learning process in the course of it all.

Poetry, unlike a play, does not have a stage dimension scripted into it. It’s thought to be self-sufficient. But we found that in translating a poem from the page onto the stage we could create something new that was “more” than the poem had been in itself.

For example: We turned the poem Please Doctor, I’ve missed my period (Ballad of Paragraph 218) into an insane oom-pah-pah song-number, make use of our own music and masks (as indeed we did a lot). The effect of a dervish-like dancing and swinging doctor telling a woman seeking an abortion that she’d “make a splendid little mummy-producing factory fodder from (her) tummy” is ghastly precisely because it is so awfully funny.

Similarly, we let a prissy matron in a vaguely Salvation Army-ish uniform narrate the story of Marie Farrar, a poor servant girl...
who hid her pregnant state until she gave birth and then killed her baby. The brutality of the social conditions which created this situation was highlighted by a number of factors such as the distaste this character displayed for her subject or the cold blue stage lighting — all of them stage elements inserted into the text.

Some effects were completely “imposed” on the poems, such as when a rather upper-class lady reads out from a newspaper that “… 300 coolies, who had been taken prisoner by the Chinese White Army and were supposed to be transported to Ping Chwen in open railway trucks, died of cold and hunger during the trip.” And then we let her giggle stupidly and repeat: “Ping Chwen!”

We spoke as a group the poem When the atrocities come like falling rain into a dark theatre, while slides projected on a white backdrop showed atrocities from Auschwitz, Vietnam, Soweto and other places of imperialist horror. Then, into complete darkness, over the deafening noise of “bombers” (three layers of different short wave static superimposed) we shouted a series of short poems from Brecht’s War primer: “General your tank is a powerful vehicle/it smashed down forests and crushed a hundred men/but it has one defect/it needs a driver.”

From design as much as necessity, we kept the entire stage bare. Clothed in black. All costumes (snatched from wardrobes and second-hand shops all over town) and props (ditto) and all make up was kept in black and white, as we wanted to achieve a completely two-dimensional effect, which would focus attention mainly on the words. We did introduce colour only in the lighting which served to increase rather than distract from the starkness of the effect.

In this fashion we were able to present Brecht’s poetry on stage as a stageable commodity in its own right. We were able to develop a workable “Kabarett”-format, and we found that there is an audience for explicitly left wing political theatre. For June/July of this year (when the Springboks come to New Zealand) Komikabaret will put on a show of South African freedom poetry.

(Anyway, we’ll try).