

# Review

Work In Progress

Judged New Zealand's best magazine book review pages in the 2006 Montana Book Awards



## Feeding Frenzy **By Sarah Lang**

WHEN LATEST KIWI THEATRE STAR ALEX ELLIS performs her solo show *Biscuit And Coffee*, it's easy to believe she's getting more and more wired. After all, she does down six cups of espresso on stage. But it's actually just decaf, she admits with a rueful smile.

Over 2005, this comic play about the fanatical quest for the perfect cup of coffee toured to 40 towns nationwide from Rawene to Gore. While large towns proffered professional theatres, Ellis and writer-producer Phil Ormsby usually set up their percolators, phone and other props at cafes, community halls and movie theatres. In a particularly-cosy Te Aroha cafe, Ellis had to shrink her usual strides to baby steps, performing in a three-metre-square area peppered with poles.

Whatever the milieu, she'd erupt seemingly effortlessly from accountant prodigy Biscuit into the five "nutbars" orbiting her life: her

sinister old boss, barista boyfriend Jude, conspiracy theorist Uncle Dan, doolally Gran, and plastic-surgery addict Loretta. Reviewers hailed a stunning new acting talent.

Lively and lithe, Ellis, 28, has dyed her bright blonde tresses chocolate brown for her new, similarly-express-pace show *Murder By Chocolate*: "a satirical tribute to the murder mystery, the cult of celebrity and, of course, chocolate". She plays Felicia Fargo, a disenchanted romance writer who, eager to create more "serious" works of art, turns her hand to crime novels. A murder mystery materialises which mirrors the book she's writing.

Ormsby, 50, leaves the lighting booth this time round to play five minor characters — as you'd expect, a fair few of them cark it (killed by chocolate, though Ellis won't reveal how exactly). Feisty Felicia attempts to unmask

the murderer while dealing with her own “chocolate issues” — her mother was the greatest chef de pâtisserie ever to hail from a Balclutha bakery.

Biscuit, coffee, chocolate — Ellis laughs off any suggestion of a food fetish. “I just used to joke that the next show would be about chocolate so I could chow down on something yummy, then people started ringing up saying, ‘Hey, when are you doing that chocolate show?’”

*Murder* plays at Wellington’s Bats Theatre (January 26-February 3) before going on national tour (see [www.flaxworks.com](http://www.flaxworks.com)), culminating at Dunedin’s Cadbury Chocolate Carnival in July. Ellis and Ormsby will return to towns that applauded *Biscuit*, such as tiny Kekerengu, “the only place between Blenheim and Kaikoura”.

Taking original New Zealand theatre to rural centres as well as cities is the raison d’être of their theatre company FlaxWorks. As well as treating small-towners to a rare visiting production, “you get to meet the locals and learn about the place in a way you wouldn’t otherwise”, says Ellis. “Plus you can build a great rapport with small audiences, and see how individuals respond — we joke afterwards about that lady who kept whispering, or that guy who cackled the whole way through.”

ELLIS AND ORMSBY met in 2000 acting in a Tauranga production of *The Tempest*, just before she left for a Melbourne acting stint. Returning to Tauranga in 2004, she caught up with him over a cup of coffee — four strong hits later the idea for *Biscuit And Coffee* was born.

After a rapt response from local theatre goers, the pair piled their props into a daggy old van (affectionately dubbed The Biscuit Tin) and caught the ferry south. Carrying complimentary cups of Karajoz coffee, locals crammed cafes for the Golden Bay première, then the Nelson showings.

But it was in Gore that Ellis worried they might have to pack up and go home. Junior National Highland Dance Champs hopefuls had booked out all the accommodation — (“not that we could afford to stay anywhere anyway”). Owing money on the hall, they dined on baked beans — then because it had started snowing just nine people braved the cold to turn up. But those nine clapped ’til their hands stung, and the organiser Darren didn’t charge for the hall. He even fixed them up beds at the local boarding school. “It’s amazing — you can be flat on your arse and people will really help you out,” Ellis glows. “Since then we haven’t looked back.”

Post its 40-town tour *Biscuit* starred at festivals including the 2005 New Zealand Coffee Festival, “though to start with I was quite nervous the audience might realise the coffee ‘facts’ weren’t exactly facts!” says Ellis. But they “got it”, as did 2006 Wellington Fringe Festival goers who voted *Biscuit* best show.

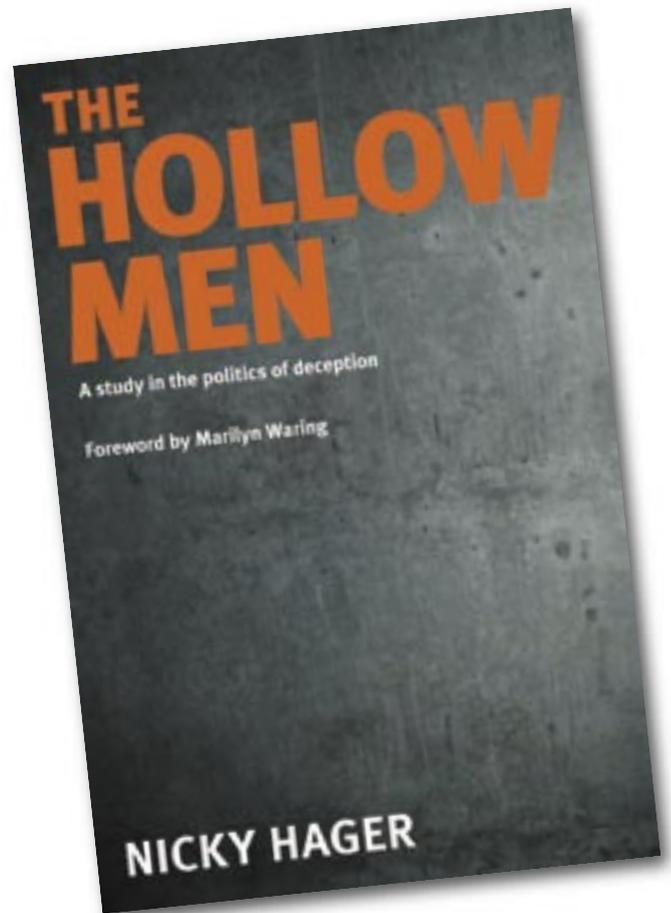
Both born and bred in Tauranga, Ellis and Ormsby often mull over moving to Auckland but find their home town a handy base. “Going on tour pays the way, but not the rent. Luckily my parents let me live with them — they see it as their contribution to the arts,” Ellis laughs. She works fulltime on the productions while Ormsby works nine-to-five as a Telecom technician, then drops by her house to tackle whatever’s “up next”, brainstorming, writing, mustering publicity, organising equipment and so on, before going home to snatch a few hours’ kip.

While Ormsby dreams of working for FlaxWorks fulltime, for now it needs his financial injection. A cash box answers whether there’s enough money for the next expense: often there’s not.

Brainstorming a new show for 2008, the pair decided to eschew fantastical themes for something more “real life”. Watch out for an as-yet-untitled “road-movie” show about middle-aged couple Carol and Nev who, after ejecting the kids from home, set off on a road tour of New Zealand in a van not dissimilar to that of their peripatetic creators.

Before touring *Biscuit* Ellis and Ormsby painted a yellow stripe around their van. *Murder*’s prompted a red neighbour and with three other ideas in the pipeline, Ellis hopes to add a new stripe each year. “This sounds cheesy, but I’m aiming for a rainbow.” ■

ROSS BROWN / MARTIN THOMAS



## The Best Of New Zealand Books

By **Warwick Roger**

### The Hollow Men

Nicky Hager (Craig Potton Publishing, \$34.99)

It should not be forgotten that this is a book based on betrayal. It tells how National Party leader Don Brash was betrayed by six members of his own party who stole and passed on to Nicky Hager what seems to have been the entire contents of Brash’s personal email system, internal party memos, even his appointments diary. Whether you regard that as a good thing or the acts of criminals will determine your view of the book.

Boiled down, it’s a scarily in-depth look at the anatomy of the Nats’ 2005 election campaign, which Brash almost won. However, amid all the excitement it shouldn’t be forgotten that this type of book was being written as early as the 1972 election, albeit without the leftish spin of a Nicky Hager back then.