

RANT AND RAVE A TREAT TO WATCH

[Hatch - or The Plight of the Penguins](#)

WRITTEN BY Geoff Chapple

DIRECTED BY Colin McColl

at Hopetoun Alpha, Auckland

From 15 Mar 2007 to 20 Mar 2007

[1 hr, no interval]

Reviewed by Kate Ward-Smythe, 18 Mar 2007

Geoff Chapple's first stage play, *Hatch*, is a short yet fascinating discovery for kiwis like me, who had no idea that in the 1920's, Joseph Hatch, who had previously been Mayor of Invercargill then a Member of Parliament, killed more than 3 million penguins living on Macquarie Island, for their oil.

Hatch centres on the moral vs. economic issues surrounding the slaughter of these creatures for profit. While he was initially celebrated for bringing much wealth to New Zealand through his entrepreneurial flare, the world eventually labelled him a cruel and greedy plunderer of penguins, forcing the Tasmanian Government, under mounting public pressure, to revoke his licence.

He spent the rest of his life trying to clear his name, through a series of public lectures. Chapple neatly structures *Hatch* so as to throw the audience straight into one of these illuminating hours with this persuasive man.

As we hear the cantankerous Hatch set out his version of the facts, he leaves us in no doubt that he is a model entrepreneur, unfazed by harsh elements, hard work and new frontiers. It is possible to sympathise with him as he highlights the irony and contraction of his critics, given the global slaughter of livestock and other creatures of the sea, for human gratification. He found the bleating of the press and luminaries of the time, hypocritical. As Chapple puts it: "There's a lot of murder about".

And yes, at the same time Hatch was rendering penguins, other far more environmentally catastrophic activities were being carried out with no governmental regulation, such as whaling, and the felling of Kauri forests. In that regard, Hatch had a right to feel hard done by, given the abundance of penguins, by comparison, at the time.

The programme notes call the outcry caused by Hatch's activities the first truly international conservation campaign. It could have easily have been fur or whales to stir a global reaction, but unluckily for Hatch, saving the penguin became the vogue cause of the day.

It is easy to see why. Penguins are beautiful, serene looking creatures, and as Chapple remarked in person after the play: they are two legged, not four legged animals. Penguins are also cute and cuddly, a fact that compounded opposition to Hatch, as a contemporary entrepreneur with an eye for soft toy manufacturing, turned penguins into the 1920's version of "Pingu" or that adorable foursome from "Madagascar".

So, perhaps predictably, and just as his oil empire is reaching its zenith, after considerable financial and personal investment, the tide turned on Hatch.

At this point Hatch becomes unrelenting in his mission to clear his name. By the end he had lost his business, wealth, political and social standing, and finally, the only thing of true value in life, the

love and safety of his family.

While Chapple paints Hatch as a man of relentless courage, in that he fought for what he thought was right until his death, sadly, in the end, that was all that was left to him. After moving to Tasmania and continuing to hound their Government to no avail, Hatch died and was buried in an unmarked grave. In the end, nobody cared.

But this driven man will be remembered, thanks in part to this enlightening play.

Hatch was, after all, a man of his time: a time when whales and seals had been brought to near extinction due to the desire for profit. But beyond penguin oil, Chapple gives us a window into Hatch's remarkable character.

For example, he raged at lighthouses being funded by the government, when in his view, each ship should pay to use the service of light as they passed (Chapple sums it up as "user pays").

He lived and was motivated by the principle that production was the source of wealth in the empire and the community. He saw his oil as an integral part of industrial complexity that was the glorious Victorian Age of Empire.

Armed with this rich content and character, Stuart Devenie brings Hatch to life with a performance that is totally engrossing. His excellent craft, humour and timing confirms that he is one of the our finest established actors.

Accompanied only by a series of well-timed and well chosen slides of historical photographs (AV design by Chapple and Rabbit), Devenie is a treat to watch and listen to in this extraordinary role, as he fills the venue with rant and rave.

From his well-crafted entrance through to his summing up, director Colin McColl guides Devenie's performance with just the right mix of pace, pause and emotional restraint.

Lighting design by Tony Rabbit is appropriately minimal and the transition from speaker arriving in a town hall in full auditorium light, to actor performing in the spotlight, is affective. Rabbit uses a few well-chosen moments, where Hatch slows to silently consider the personal cost to him and his family, caused by his relentless fight for the right to continue his trade, to drop the hall into ice-cold light.

Set-wise, Hopetown Alpha is the perfect venue for a 1920's public lecture, and aside from some patriotic pomp and ceremony by way of flags and ribbons, the venue does the rest.

Costume designer Denise Hosty layers Hatch - a hardy man, who lived his life in a cold, no fuss climate - in shades of grey and brown, but adds a touch of the eccentric, with a bow-tie and long, wild side-burns.

Hatch is an insightful hour of theatre that audiences all over New Zealand will have the opportunity to experience, as it will be on the road to the South Island as soon as the Auckland season closes.

For my companion and me this play is timely in that internationally, there is mounting pressure from some powerful and moneyed Nations, to allow the slaughter of whales on a commercial scale, to continue. There is the opportunity to resist, as Hatch was resisted.
