

# A Shortcut To Happiness

*A play by Roger Hall*

"There are shortcuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them." So wrote Vicki Baum and when I read that quote a few years ago, it stuck in my mind.

Some time later, those words came back to me, when I was doing folk dancing in Havelock North. My wife had gone the previous week, reported that it was fun, and there was no stopping me.

The group meets on Wednesdays at ten and (short tea-break aside) goes non-stop to midday. By which time I am almost exhausted. So at least I know it is giving me exercise. (It exercises the brain as well as the body, and occasionally the two co-operate.) But it is *fun*. And the music! It is engaging, contagious, irresistible and sometimes haunting.

About the third time I was there, I jokingly said to a friend, "I can feel a play coming on." About half an hour later, I thought, "My God, there really IS a play here."

That, of course, is the easy bit. The idea.

What follows is the hard work.

First the research. In my case, learn some more dances.

Dianne and I spend only some of the time in Havelock North but most of time in Auckland, so I had to find a local dance group there.

I went to Cox's Bay, with Ruth Ames in charge, in the Sea Scout Hall. Here there was a small group of regulars. They made me welcome, helped me learn new steps, and were very patient with me. But I was acutely aware that I was the beginner amongst experienced regulars.

Ruth gave me a lot of help, along with Bronwen Arlington, who demonstrated various possible dances suitable for the play. (Most theatres can afford only a small cast so that for most of the time there are only seven dancers on stage, and the choice of dances was affected by this.)

At Havelock North, there were always fifteen to twenty-five people attending. It's fair to say that among the group, there is a wide range of abilities. As a learner, it was comforting to know there were plenty of others in the same situation, but none of us is ever made to feel awkward or out of place.

Joanne Perry is a genius at putting everyone at ease as she teaches us new dances and she is helped by several other experienced dancers who patiently guide us through the steps each week. And we all have a lot of laughs along the way.

Joanne made more suggestions for suitable dances and got the group to demonstrate whilst I video-ed them, first the whole class learning the steps and then the smaller group of experienced ones showing how it should be done. (I wisely made sure I was never on film.)

But, of course, dances themselves won't make a play. There had to be a story about the people taking the classes and the person who taught it. After many false starts on the script (as always), I decided that the teacher would be a Russian woman immigrant to New Zealand (Natasha), whose English isn't good enough for her to get a job teaching at a school. So she cleans houses and gives a once-a-week class in folk dancing.



*Joanne Perry, leader of Ma Navu, the Havelock North Wednesday morning group. Dancing Ana Be Koach with her are Colin Tibbenham and Sylvia Mudford.*

PHOTO: RUSSELL PERRY

There are ten thousand Russians living in Auckland so my other form of research was interviewing some (beautiful) Russian women immigrants to NZ. A tough assignment, but I was up to it. What did they think of New Zealand? What were the difficulties? What was it like learning English (some of them were studying, or had studied, at English language schools)? What was life like in the Russia they left?

The scenes alternate between the dance classes and the home of a widower (Ned) where some of the class goes afterwards for coffee.

Dancing is but part of the play and, most of the time, we won't see the whole dance—there simply isn't the time. But I'm sure audiences will enjoy what they see and, of course, enjoy the music.

After the director of the first production at Dunedin's Fortune Theatre watched the videos of the Havelock North group in action, the next week she turned up at a local group eager to try. And that's how I hope the audience – or, at least some of them – will feel: that by the end of the play, they, too, will be feeling that this is something they can enjoy and be willing to give it a go.

*A SHORTCUT TO HAPPINESS* opens at Dunedin's Fortune Theatre on 18 November and runs to 17 December; at Court Theatre, Christchurch, 10 December to 28 January; Circa Theatre, Wellington, 14 April to 26 May, and Auckland Theatre Company from 7 June to 7 July.

Roger Hall



PHOTO: RUSSELL PERRY