

FABULOUS ARTS AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND PRESENTS

MATES AND LOVERS






17 - 27 NOVEMBER 2010


Fabulous Arts
Aotearoa New Zealand
www.fabnz.com

ROBERT
CATTO
PHOTOGRAPHER
WWW.CATTO.CO.NZ


InforAge

TheAlchemist
DESIGN + PRINT

    THE
BASEMENT

PAST AND PRESENT

How does the past speak to the present? As a stage play, *Mates & Lovers* explores this question. It presents the modern-day audience with a kaleidoscope of moments from our past, from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth. It invites us to consider the connections between the asylum patient of the 1890s, the drag artist of the Second World War, and the activist of the 1970s and '80s. On stage, Toby and Ben breathe life into the photograph of Mr Collie and Mr Greem on the cover of *Mates & Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand*, the book that spawned the play. Their scenarios change as the play progresses, forcing the past and the present into dialogue with each other.



In writing the book, I toyed with the idea that the homoerotic past is like a frayed, multi-stranded rope laid along a time line. As time passes, strands of thought and experience drop off and pick up; the new eventually takes over from the old. There are continuities, though, alongside the changes. Although our predecessors had none of the legal freedom or the community infrastructure we take for granted, some aspects of their lives seem familiar to us.



So it is with Robert Gant. An immigrant, chemist, photographer and lover of men, he found his way to the Wairarapa from England in the early 1880s. He made friends with the locals, and his albumen prints preserve their lives for posterity. These were tactile, sensuous attachments. The men loop their arms around one another, rest heads on shoulders, and kiss. They loll in the sun, bathe naked in the rivers, and pose languorously in doorways. Gant's men challenge our assumption that male colonials were always stoic, rough and emotionally distant.



To look at Gant's photographs is to rethink colonial masculinity, to queer the pitch. What do we make of the man in a kimono, arch smile on his face, enjoying a tea party? One of his companions, Gant himself, wears a wedding dress. This is Victorian artifice in all its glory, with hair combs, earrings, chiffon and pearls. Cross-dressers Boulton and Park were arrested in London in 1870, the newspapers ran the story, and the wider public learned about 'camp' and 'drag'. Here in New Zealand, a Wairarapa local was described as a man 'of the Boulton and Park stamp'.

Gant was a fetishist too. Beheadings fascinated him: swords poised on long white necks, hands bound behind backs, prayers for redemption before the guillotine fell. Gothic horror meets the male form. Other images show thighs, ankles and shoes, a camp rearticulation of a familiar Victorian theme.

Robert Gant's world was not our own, but its affection and theatricality gesture towards the present in suggestive ways. Like the book, *Mates & Lovers* the play invites us to explore the connections, think about the changes and continuities, and immerse ourselves in the pleasures and sufferings of male friendship, intimacy and desire.

Chris Brickell

All photos: Robert Gant. C/-Alexander Turnbull Library

Opposite: 'In Bunny's Bush, 1888'







All photos: Robert Gant, C/-Alexander Turnbull Library

Opposite page: 'Old Maids of Lee'

Above: 'Summer Morning'



'Goodbye'. Robert Gant, C/-Alexander Turnbull Library