



STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed to be used post-performance by teachers for students who have seen *The Road That Wasn't There*. It includes an interview with the company about their process of making the show, and discussion points around specific elements, with footnotes and hyperlinks to additional information. Translations and pronunciation guides for Māori words used in this document can be found online at maoridictionary.co.nz

ABOUT THE SHOW



The Road That Wasn't There is an original dark fairy tale by Trick of the Light Theatre. Written by Ralph McCubbin Howell, and directed by Hannah Smith, it tells the story of a young woman who follows a paper road on a map and finds herself in a paper world. It seems a land of possibility but she soon discovers that things that happen in the fictional world can have frighteningly real consequences. Through puppetry, shadowplay, and live music, it weaves an uncanny tale reminiscent of [Neil Gaiman](#), [Margaret Mahy](#), and *Pan's Labyrinth*.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Trick of the Light is a theatre company from Wellington, New Zealand, founded by Hannah Smith and Ralph McCubbin Howell. Ralph and Hannah met at Victoria University where they were both studying theatre, and now create and tour original work around the world. They like to make theatre that is playful, inventive, and thought-provoking, and their shows are unified by an attention to narrative, inventive visual design, and belief that theatre should resonate with the wider world. Their previous works include *The Bookbinder*, *Tröll*, and *The Devil's Half-Acre*. You can find out more about the company and their other shows at www.trickofthelight.co.nz.

MAKING THE ROAD THAT WASN'T THERE

An interview with director/designer Hannah Smith
and writer/performer Ralph McCubbin Howell

How did this show come about?

R - We first made this show when we were living in the UK in 2012 and wanted to take something to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. We were both feeling a bit homesick, and we ended up making a story deeply rooted in Aotearoa¹.

H - We were making the show on a shoestring budget, however Ralph wrote this vast story that covers three different worlds and numerous characters, so the decision to work with puppets was partly down to economics (puppets are cheaper than actors). Also, we're into obsessive details, and so the design is influenced by the content - it's a story about paper roads, so it made sense to us to tell it with paper puppets and cardboard sets.



R - I recorded a first draft of the soundtrack in the bathroom of our flat with a guitar that I'd bought from a second-hand shop and a melodica loaned by a friend. Then we drove up to Edinburgh and performed the show every day for the month of Fringe, making changes and tweaks as the season went on and we could see how audiences were responding.

H - When we came home we lined up a tour all round the country. Before setting off we gave the design a major overhaul based on what we'd learnt in Edinburgh - rebuilding all of the puppets, making changes to the set, and having our friend [Tane Upjohn-Beatson](#) compose and record a new soundtrack that took Ralph's initial ideas and developed them into something much more expansive and orchestrated. We are notorious tinkerers so the design has undergone a few more overhauls since then (we only recently added the life-sized silhouettes), and we continue to hone the script and performance to make it better and keep it alive.

¹ Aotearoa - Māori name for New Zealand, meaning Land of the Long White Cloud.

What inspired the show?

R - A variety of sources. I grew up in rural North Canterbury and had always been fascinated by the paper roads that dotted the region - roads that existed on paper, but had never been built in the real world. There are some 56,000 kilometres of paper roads across Aotearoa / New Zealand.



H - Some aspects of the play are drawn from historical fact, particularly its geographical and historical settings. [Saint Bathans](#) is a real village in [Central Otago](#) where my dad once had a house. Only nine people live there these days but it was once a booming goldrush town with a population of thousands. The description of Saint Bathans as The Town By The Upside Down Hill comes from the fact that the lake next to the town was once a 120-metre high hill, before it was hollowed out by gold-miners.

R - The play isn't set in a particular era, and I play pretty fast and loose with the facts, but Maggie's family is inspired by the many Scottish immigrants who settled in Central Otago. The poverty they describe would have been a reality for many through the depressions that followed the gold rush.

H - Wiri Whiterats is inspired by the real life Barney White-Rats, who was a swagman who roamed across Central Otago through the late 1800s, performing shows for children with his dancing rats. My dad's partner Angela told us about him when she heard where we were setting the show.

R - The script is strongly influenced by the children's fantasy books we grew up reading but some other elements are inspired by older folklore and myth. The story that Roland performs is based on the legend of Kaiamio² and the Kōpūwai from Otago's Te Rapuwai tribe, and the pīwakawaka is a nod to another Māori myth, of Māui and Hine-nui-te-po. There are also references to a bunch of contemporary urban legends - big cats roaming the foothills of South Canterbury³ and lost [moa](#) in the bush.⁴

² Kaiamio - Pronounced Kai-ah-mee-or.

³ [tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/new-zealanders-share-stories-encountering-claimed-south-island-panther-like-creature](https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/new-zealanders-share-stories-encountering-claimed-south-island-panther-like-creature)

⁴ [stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/207478/Moa-hunting-resumes-after-fresh-evidence](https://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/207478/Moa-hunting-resumes-after-fresh-evidence)

STORYTELLING AND MYTH



*"My lords and ladies of the Maniototo.
A cautionary tale for your edification.
Upon our very island, not two days walk from here,
there lived a dreaded beast known as the Kōpūwai..."*⁵

Whilst *The Road That Wasn't There* is an original work, it is rooted in myth and folklore, including elements of [Māori](#)⁶ mythology. Māori are the original inhabitants of Aotearoa / New Zealand who settled there from Polynesia around 800 years ago. In *The Road That Wasn't There* Maggie first meets Roland rehearsing a version of the Māori folktale of Kaiamio and the Kōpūwai – a mythical beast that was part-man, part-dog, and part reptile.

Activity - Read over Roland's speech on page 20 of the script.

Discussion point - Is this story similar to any other myths or legends you know?

⁵ [Maniototo](#) – A sparsely populated, high-country region of Central Otago in the South Island of Aotearoa / New Zealand.
[Kōpūwai](#) – A mythical beast in a legend from Otago's Te Rapuwai tribe.

⁶ A useful video guide to pronouncing the word Māori itself can be found at <https://youtu.be/X2pjPdEskbs>

MYTH AND LANDSCAPE



Roland's version of the Kōpūwai story leaves out some details that are found in other versions⁷. In some, the Kōpūwai kept a pack of fierce two-headed dogs. When he was killed his dogs were turned into stone, forming the rocky outcrops on the summit of the [Old Man Range](#). This version of the Kōpūwai story can thus be said to be an **origin myth**.



Summit of the Old Man Range

DEFINITION

origin myth: a myth that describes the origin of some feature of the natural or social world.

Discussion point – Can you think of any features of the local landscape that have an origin myth?

⁷

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/otago/places/old-woman-and-old-man-kopuwai-ranges/history-and-culture/>

PATTERNING



"You've drawn a map that'll lead him right to you. Easy as following rope. He's gunna find you wherever you go - track you down and take you back."

Discussion point – Is Roland's presentation of the Kōpūwai story simply entertainment, or does it serve another purpose within the story?

Key ideas – Roland's story **foreshadows** the encounter Maggie will have with Retlaw. Maggie's encounter with Retlaw is **patterned** on Kaiamio's encounter with the Kōpūwai. Foreshadowing and patterning are both useful storytelling techniques. Together they create a sense of suspense and encourage an audience to make connections within a play's story.

DEFINITIONS

foreshadowing: hinting towards what is to come later in the story.

patterning: the repetition of an idea, structure, or image within a story.

Discussion points – Can you find other sections in the script that echo elements of the Kōpūwai myth through similar actions, words, or imagery? Can you think of other stories (in books or films) that make use of foreshadowing or patterning?

MYTH AND SYMBOLISM

**“Hey, you better watch that pīwakawaka of yours, eh girl.
Keep that racket up - he’s gunna wake up the monsters.”**

Another Māori myth lies behind the play’s depiction of the [pīwakawaka](#) (fantail) - the bird that accompanies Maggie on her travels to the paper world. Pīwakawaka are a familiar presence in the bush of Aotearoa / New Zealand, known for their friendly cheeping and energetic flight. However a commonly held superstition is that a fantail inside a house is a harbinger of death. This superstition has its origins in the myth of trickster-hero Māui and the goddess of death, Hine-nui-te-po.



The pīwakawaka

A west coast tradition tells a tale in which Māui, the great Māori hero, determined to drink from the waters of life, which were found in the underworld, so that humans would live forever and there would be no more death. The underworld was located in the womb of Hine-nui-te-pō, the fearsome goddess of death. When humans died, they were drawn back into the womb of Hine-nui-te-pō, just as they had emerged from their own mothers’ wombs as babies. So Māui too had to enter the underworld by crawling in between Hine-nui-te-pō’s legs, which he attempted one day while she was asleep and thus off her guard, lying back with her legs apart. But a pīwakawaka, who was watching,

found the sight of the fully grown Māui disappearing into Hine-nui-te-pō like a baby so funny that he laughed, waking the terrible goddess, who snapped her legs shut, crushing Māui to death. This is the reason humans are doomed to die, for if Māui had succeeded, there would have been no death in the world.

Discussion points – Where does the pīwakawaka appear in *The Road That Wasn’t There*? What might we interpret these appearances to mean?

LOCAL LEGENDS

“She’d always been a local legend. There was a rumour in the township that she was sitting on a fortune - that somewhere in her house she’d stashed away a heap of money. It was only a story of course. The kind of small town nonsense that gets built up through the years...”

Maggie is described as being a local legend because rumours and exaggerated stories about her have been shared around the community. The character of Wiri White-Rats is inspired by a real person who might be described as a local legend - [Barney White-Rats](#) (Winters), a swagman who roamed the countryside throughout the 1800s, performing shows for children with his dancing rats.

In 1849, a man set out from Port Chalmers in Dunedin to spend the next 60 years of his life as a ‘swagger’, a homeless man who roamed on foot from town to town around the lower half of the South Island. Much about him remains unknown. He was known as Professor Winters, or Barney Whiterats – or maybe his last name was Wasserbrunner. Sources differ. He travelled with a troupe of performing white mice, with which he entertained children at rural schools. He also showed them shadowgraphs – pictures shown as shadows on a lighted screen. At times he showed up with a Punch and Judy show, a magic lantern, or a monkey and an organ. He lived into his nineties, and some say he died in Timaru, some in Oamaru.



DEFINITIONS

Punch and Judy show: a traditional English puppet show presented on the miniature stage of a tall collapsible booth

Magic lantern: an optical device using slides to display a magnified image on a white screen, wall, etc., in a darkened room



Wiri is described in different ways throughout *The Road That Wasn't There*:

MAGGIE: They called him Wiri White-Rats. No one knew his real name. His beard hung in tangles like vines in the bush, and his skin was like worn leather boots. They said he'd come down for the gold rush, but got here a lifetime too late. I heard he'd run from his past – that he'd got demons he'd never faced up to. Now he tramped from town to town, performing shows for those who'd watch. People tended to avoid him because he reminded them of their bad luck."

WIRI WHITE-RATS: I know a thing or two. I've seen things that you've never dreamed of. There are monsters in these mountains, girl, and giants in the bush. I've seen great hairy men in the shadows who could gobble you up in one bite. I've swum the deepest, blackest lakes and felt the taniwha brush past my legs. I've walked across mountains and rivers and cities and watched the world get old and scarred. They can call me what they like. I know some things, girl. Trust me."

Legendary figures like Barney Whiterats are good inspirations for stories partly because so little is known about them and partly because often the facts that are known are unusual details.

Discussion Point - Brainstorm some local legends from your own community or local history.

Activity - Using one of these local legends, write a story about them that blends fact with fiction.

PUPPETRY



“Everyone who lived there seemed to be wearing fancy dress. Their hair was as white as the buildings. It made them look like sketches on paper, not flesh and blood at all.”

In *The Road That Wasn't There* some parts of the story are told through puppetry and other parts through live action. At times actors, puppets and silhouettes are on stage together.

DEFINITIONS

Puppet - artificial figure representing a human being or an animal, manipulated by the hand, rods, wires, etc.

Silhouette - a two-dimensional representation of the outline of an object, as a cut out or configurational drawing, uniformly filled in with black.

In the interview with *Trick of the Light*, Hannah says: “We're into obsessive details, and so the design is influenced by the content - it's a story about paper roads, so it made sense to tell it with paper puppets and cardboard sets.”

Discussion points - which parts of the story are told with shadow puppets and which with rod puppets? How do the different forms relate to different parts of the story? Do you feel differently about a character played by a puppet rather than an actor? Why does it “make sense” to tell the story this way?