

Chasing the Dragon: Hubris, the folly of man.

By Peter Wallace\*

*“Due to poor productions in the recent past, it would be fair to say that Theatre Workshops’ existence depends on a successful 1999 production.”*

*From Michael Robinson’s Summer Shakespeare Proposal, 1999.*

Amateur theatre satisfies a niche that professional theatre cannot occupy. Raw deliveries and modest budgets emphasise the discrepancy between actor and character, who present more one and the same in professional performances. Preventing that abstraction succeeds in communicating the personality of a production, particularly the risks and anxieties that high-end stage shows distract from. The historical longevity of theatres based in Tāmaki Makaurau have an ominous track record. Live theatrical performances lack the entertainment value they once proposed to modern audiences, overshadowed by the arrival of television bringing drama into in audience’s homes.

If relative professional bastions such as the Mercury Theatre and the Pop-up Globe were forced into closure, how could less broadly appealing amateur productions hope to survive? The short answer is they did not. We only have to look to some of the leading amateur theatre organisations in Tāmaki Makaurau to reveal the trials and tribulations of the amateur venture and the key reasons why they became unsustainable. Theatre Corporate and the University of Auckland’s (UoA) Summer Shakespeare were each forced into closure thirty years apart due to encountering financial turmoil. Though the circumstances leading up to their respective turmoils differ, a similarity exists in that both productions remained open for years in the face of slim margins. This collection of essays will explore why amateur theatre productions have insisted on existing for as long as they could afford and an examination of when self-fulfilment is prioritised above self-preservation. This first essay will delve into the experience of the rise and fall of the University of Auckland’s own Summer Shakespeare. A venture that enjoyed consistent albeit modest success until lightning in a bottle tempted them to transcend their amateur status.

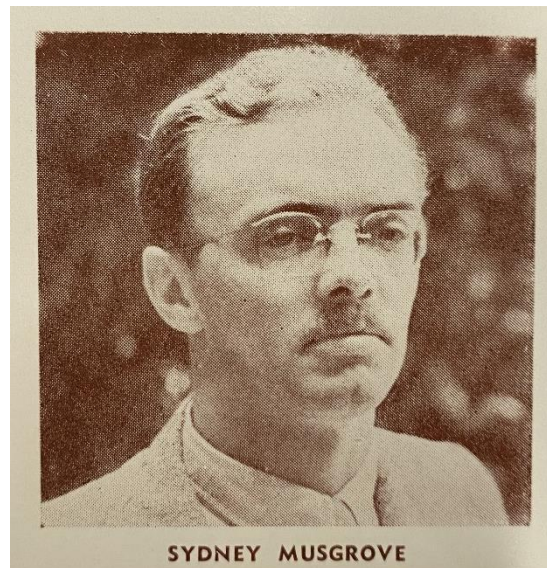
Theatre Workshop was a body established by the UoA to bankroll productions as a part of their drama program.<sup>1</sup> These productions tended to lean toward the avant-garde in both subject matter and theatrical direction, hence representing a financial

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Tarling “History of Summer Shakespeare,” Filmed 2013. Youtube Video, 0:36.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXZUpr8h8gl>

risk due to their low accessibility.<sup>2</sup> To remedy this by securing a reliable secondary income stream, UoA greenlit Summer Shakespeare in 1962.<sup>3</sup>

Theatre Workshop ultimately preferred to maximise Summer Shakespeare's profit margins so that the drama program could enjoy deeper budgets, which resulted in the search for talent turning inward. Student actors were easy enough to come by, but finding a qualified producer amongst university faculty would have been far more challenging were it not for an unassuming English professor, Sydney Musgrove.



Photograph of Sydney Musgrove, 1955. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/10, University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

Musgrove's contribution to the success of Summer Shakespeare cannot be understated. He would join UoA in 1947<sup>4</sup> while simultaneously building a reputation for himself as a practitioner of the arts within Auckland theatre circles.<sup>5</sup> Well-versed in dramaturgy and boasting involvement with several plays even before his producing debut in 1951,<sup>6</sup> Musgrove would only consolidate his position as a force of nature when *The Lady's Not for Burning* received notable acclaim on the production end, even if Christopher Fry's direction left some to be desired.<sup>7</sup> Following that production, Musgrove worked alongside Theatre Guild New Zealand in 1955, a group that raised the standard for local productions.<sup>8</sup> Afterwards, he worked with the Auckland

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<sup>2</sup> Tarling, "History of Summer Shakespeare". 0:53.

<sup>3</sup> Tarling, "History of Summer Shakespeare". 0:20.

<sup>4</sup> "Just the time for a play" The Special Collections Musgrove Exhibition, accessed January 9, 2024. <https://www.specialcollections.auckland.ac.nz/musgrove-exhibition/>

<sup>5</sup> Typescript of Musgrove's involvement with Theatre Guild New Zealand and previous work. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/10. The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark. Performed by Theatre Guild (NZ). University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>6</sup> Musgrove's notebook from the production of *The Lady's Not for Burning*. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/7. Item 1/7/1. Producer's notebook from the production of *The Lady's Not For Burning*. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>7</sup> Newspaper reviews of the production *The Lady's Not For Burning*. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/7. Item 1/7/5, University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>8</sup> Review of Theatre Guild's production of *Hamlet*. Theatre Guild New Zealand and previous work. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/10, University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

University Drama Society in 1959,<sup>9</sup> which would eventually become Theatre Workshop.

Given his history, it is unsurprising that Theatre Workshop selected Musgrove to produce Summer Shakespeare's Inaugural 1963 production of *Hamlet*. Under Musgrove, Summer Shakespeare was a consistent commercial and critical success. This could have owed to Musgrove's anti-gimmick, philosophy which was first applauded during the Auckland University Drama Society's 1959 production of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>10</sup> While critics tired of theatres attempting subversive, modern spins, Musgrove's restraint and faithfulness to the source material was, ironically, a breath of fresh air.<sup>11</sup>

Musgrove would continue to produce the annual Summer Shakespeare through the remaining 60's and early 70's, with each production standing stronger than the last. Musgrove's character seeps out of his personal notes kept during the auditioning and blocking processes. Streams of consciousness flood the pages in a voice that could only belong to Musgrove. In one such example, Musgrove observes that student Dan Henderson is unfit to portray Lysander in the 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Musgrove begins with a cordial note lamenting Henderson's tendency to deliver lines pessimistically, before interrupting himself midsentence to hastily scrawl and underline "NO" directly underneath his earlier note.<sup>12</sup> It speaks to Musgrove's bardic tendencies that he would choose to comedically immortalise the moment Henderson's audition took a turn for the heinous, despite no guarantee anyone besides Musgrove himself would enjoy the excerpt tucked deeply away in his notes.

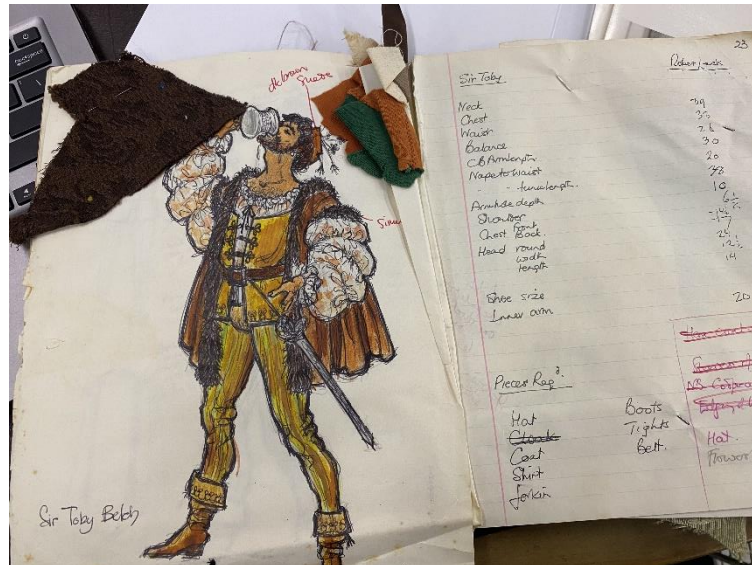
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<sup>9</sup> Detail of Musgrove's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/13. Item 1/13/3, Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Performed by the Auckland University Drama Society. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>10</sup> Newspaper review of Musgrove's *Romeo and Juliet*. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 1. File 1/13. Item 1/13/3, Photograph album from the production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Loose papers inside include programmes, newspaper reviews and photographs. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>11</sup> Newspaper review of Musgrove's *Romeo and Juliet*, 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from Musgrove's audition notes. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 2. File 2/4. Item 2/4/1, Two producer's notebooks from the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.



Photograph of A Midsummer Night's Dream Costuming Book, 1970. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 2. File 2/5. Item 2/5/2, University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

But eventually all, good things must come to an end. Musgrove departed Summer Shakespeare, leaving Theatre Workshop with a producer-shaped hole in their operation. In 1974, Theatre Workshop broke convention by hiring Stephen Crane to direct their upcoming performance of *Julius Caesar*.<sup>13</sup> Crane acted with both the Central and Mercury theatres, the latter of which was for its time the largest and most commercially successful professional theatre in Auckland.<sup>14</sup> However, he had no ties to UoA. For the first time since Summer Shakespeare's inception, Theatre Workshop turned their search for talent outward, seeking accomplished professionals to elevate their performances.

Summer Shakespeare continued to thrive in Auckland off the foundation Musgrove had laid. While the employment of outside talent lent Summer Shakespeare productions the perspectives of an industry professional, it did little to shift audience expectations. Attendees understood that at its core, Summer Shakespeare was a student-centric venture – line deliveries would be occasionally stilted, the set design admissible. Audience expectations were at a comfortable equilibrium with the quality of performance that Theatre Workshop could organise on their allocated budget. This would all change in 1995 following a financially disappointing 1994 season of *The Winter's Tale*,<sup>15</sup> which was perhaps a poor selection of play given the seasonal dissonance. Based on the 1994 box office returns, 1995 projected a deficit of NZD\$5,751, based on a conservative estimate that each show would sell 50%

<sup>13</sup> Past Summer Shakespeare directors mentioned in Trust Records. Archives. 2022/13. Series 4. Item 4/2, Folder of photocopied ephemera from past performances, covers period 1975-1998. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>14</sup> Folder detailing the Association of Community Theatres activities throughout 1978. NZMS 886 Archive, Box 2 Series 14, ACT 1978. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

<sup>15</sup> Financial statement for The Winter's Tale. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

capacity.<sup>16</sup> Though the financial situation was far from dire, Theatre Workshop insisted on upping the ante, increasing their director fee to a generous NZD\$5,000, hoping to attract an exceptional talent.<sup>17</sup>

The call for a director would eventually find its way into the hands of Michael Robinson, a Canadian improvisational theatre specialist and Theatresports player that made New Zealand his home in 1990.<sup>18</sup> Robinson was of extraordinary talent and highly regarded by those in the professional circuit for his continually impressive entries at the Queenstown Shakespeare Festival.<sup>19</sup> Excited by the prospect of working with students, Robinson submitted a proposal for *As You Like It*, which was eventually accepted. Whether through the prestige associated with Robinson's name or bold direction, *As You Like It* was a monumental critical success, and commercially defied all reasonable expectations by generating NZD\$52,816 after expenses.<sup>20</sup> To put this figure in perspective, Theatre Workshop had been satisfied with profits of ~NZD\$5,000 from past productions.

In an instant, the potential of Summer Shakespeare had been realised. Theatre Workshop could finance esoteric productions until the sun burnt out if they could recreate the success of their 1995 season. They concluded that Robinson had brought an air of professionalism to their previously amateurish productions, so Summer Shakespeare should adapt accordingly. This notion was compounded by the fear that a new audience expectation had been set, one they would either need to match or raise. The 1995 production allocated NZD\$19,300 for crew expenditure, NZD\$8,000 of which was accounted for by Robinson and his producer. Comparatively, the 1996 production allocated NZD\$23,200 to afford premium rate stage managers, lighting crews and set designers,<sup>21</sup> though Robinson himself would not return. The 1996 production weathered additional risk by investing substantially in set purchases such as seating, and spending NZD\$9,300 on "*venue additional charges*". The 1996 Summer Shakespeare production of *Twelfth Night* would go on to profit NZD\$25,200.<sup>22</sup> Had it been any other year, this figure would have been something to celebrate, but off the heels of 1995, it was hard to see as anything other than reality knocking. Desperately clinging to the success of *As You Like It*, even in the face of declining returns, not only would crew expenditure increase again to NZD\$28,300, but

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<sup>16</sup> Summer Shakespeare 1995 Budget. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 3. TW and Summer Shakespeare budgets. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>17</sup> Summer Shakespeare 1995 Budget, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Robinson, "Mini-Bio" IMDB. Accessed January 14, 2024, [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0732918/bio/?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0732918/bio/?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, "Mini-Bio"

<sup>20</sup> Financial statement for *As You Like It*. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>21</sup> Summer Shakespeare 1996 Budget. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 3. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>22</sup> Financial statement for *Twelfth Night*. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

an additional NZD\$1,300 would be allocated to the 1997 advertising budget.<sup>23</sup> The 1997 Summer Shakespeare production of *Macbeth* would return a profit of NZD\$9,600, marking the second consecutive year of considerable decline.<sup>24</sup>

By this time, it seemed certain that the success of *As You Like It* had been lightning in a bottle. The relatively disappointing, though sizeable profits obtained in 1996 could be attributed to residual hype from the 1995 performance. Summer Shakespeare was fated to fall back into the annual ~NZD\$5,000 profit they had once been comfortable with. Perhaps reflecting on the risk Summer Shakespeare took in 1994, shelling out for a premium director while facing down a potential deficit of NZD\$5,751, the ante would be upped once more. The 1998 Summer Shakespeare production of *Coriolanus* would push Theatre Workshop's coffers to their limit. Crew fees would swell to a record NZD\$32,500 while the final total budget would total NZD\$86,665.<sup>25</sup> Based on estimates, Theatre Workshop expected *Coriolanus* to profit NZD\$12,500. This figure was jeopardised by the forecast anticipating three performances would be rained out, forcing an increase in audience capacity of thirty seats to offset losses incurred by rainouts. Oliver Driver and Burt Turner were selected to direct what was shaping up to

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<sup>23</sup> Summer Shakespeare 1997 Budget. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 3. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>24</sup> Financial statement for *Macbeth*. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>25</sup> Summer Shakespeare 1998 Budget. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 3. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

be a perfectly successful play, auditions and rehearsals went smoothly, it was to be a month-long run, spanning 26 performances between February 13 and March 14.

THEATRE WORKSHOP INCORPORATED					
EXPENSES COMMITTED TO CORIOLANUS PRODUCTION					
FOR THE PERIOD OF NO ELECTRICITY					
Show period 4 weeks					
	Total Show	Inc. GST	GST		
Advertisement in NZ Herald	7000	1,113.84	123.76	990.08	
Lighting Cost	6000	1,687.50	187.50	1,500.00	
Staging (Seating)	4500	1,265.63	140.63	1,125.00	
Rhino huts/ Dressing rooms*3	1140	320.63	35.63	285.00	
Total fees Payable to crew of show	29250	7,312.50		7,312.50	
Set Materials	5000	1,406.25	156.25	1,250.00	
Properties	2500	703.13	78.13	625.00	
Set Build	2000	562.50	62.50	500.00	
Costumes and Make Up	6500	1,828.13	203.13	1,625.00	
Sound	3000	843.75	93.75	750.00	
Other Marketing and Advertising costs	8500	2,390.63	265.63	2,125.00	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>75390</b>	<b>19,434.47</b>	<b>1,346.89</b>	<b>18,087.58</b>	
Total Expenses being claimed as a loss \$19434.47					
The show has not been able to deliver it's usual performance level due to the closure of it's target audience, and the actual losses are far greater than the amount being claimed.					
Friday 20 February					
Monday 23 February					
Tuesday 24 February					
Wednesday 25 February					
Thursday 26 February					
Friday 27 February					
Saturday 28 February					
7 Performances cancelled out of 27 scheduled					

Photograph of Coriolanus' expense report mid production. Note the eighth performance had yet to be cancelled, 1998. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

On February 28, barely halfway through *Coriolanus*' run, the production had reported a loss of NZD\$33,304.<sup>26</sup> Throughout February and March of 1998, Auckland experienced a series of citywide blackouts, resulting in 8 of the 26 performances being cancelled. By March 18, four days after *Coriolanus*' final showing, Summer Shakespeare reported a deficit of NZD\$28,866 to Theatre Workshop.<sup>27</sup> Chasing the air of professionalism that once soared Summer Shakespeare to extraordinary heights had brought them crashing down to ruin. The loss would almost bankrupt Theatre Workshop and leave the future of Summer Shakespeare relying on a successful 1999 production. Theatre Workshop's efforts to transcend their unremarkable reputation as an amateur production would certainly be their downfall. The culprit of amateur-theatre failure had usually been financial volatility, but Summer Shakespeare represented an exception right up until their unexpected success in 1995. Despite being founded on the expectation that profits would be returned to bankroll Theatre Workshop's smaller independent productions, as budgets got bigger and profits got slimmer, the ambition of Summer Shakespeare continued to grow. Performing relatively low budget shows without professional talent in the style of Musgrove never left the table, and yet

<sup>26</sup> Financial statement for Coriolanus. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>27</sup> Financial statement for Coriolanus.

Summer Shakespeare persevered to transcend their amateur status. Hence, it is evident that Summer Shakespeare was desperate not only to reclaim their financial heights, but their critical heights.

Whilst Theatre Workshop picked up the pieces of *Coriolanus* and budget for the following year, across the country in Christchurch Robinson began to draft his 1999 proposal. Robinson believed that a potential revival of Theatre Workshop hinged on his ability to recreate the success of *As you Like It*. But as we will see in the next article, Robinson would find out you can lead a horse to water, but you cant make it drink.



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