

Chasing the Dragon: Coup de grâce

By Peter Wallace*

“The Show has not been able to deliver its usual performance level due to the closure of its target audience, and the actual losses are far greater than the amount being claimed.”

From Theatre Workshop Incorporated’s Coriolanus expenditure report, 1999.

Professional theatres in Tāmaki Makaurau had been on the decline since 1976 which marked the beginning of several consecutive years appropriate funding was unable to be allocated by the Arts Council.¹ Come 1986 Theatre Corporate, the second largest Auckland theatre, would close its curtains for a final time. Soon after in 1992, Mercury Theatre, the largest Auckland theatre, would follow suit.² For the University of Auckland’s amateur annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare to beat the odds and enjoy a consistent, albeit modest audience since 1963 was unprecedented. After their 1995 production captured lightning in a bottle, Summer Shakespeare’s future productions began spending beyond their means to recapture the commercial and critical success of 1995, although failing worse each time.³ This pattern continued until 1998 at which point a series of citywide blackouts forced one third of the scheduled performances to be cancelled.⁴ This article will examine why Summer Shakespeare turned away from a lifeline thrown by past successful director Michael Robinson and instead take a risk on unknown directors with (at best) avant-garde ideas and consider how this recontextualises our wider understanding of the behaviour amateur theatres operations are inclined to.

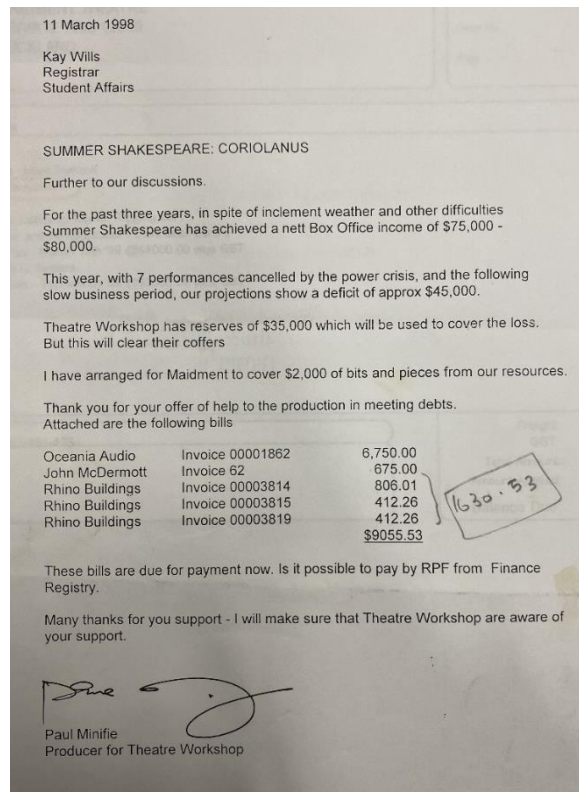
Immediately following the catastrophe that was the 1998 Summer Shakespeare performance of *Coriolanus*, Theatre Workshop had initiated an effective state of emergency. On March 11, Theatre Workshop producer Paul Minifie cast aside pride and wrote to Student Affairs to appeal for deliverance. With only three days remaining in *Coriolanus*’ seasonal run, Theatre Workshop projected a deficit of ~NZD\$45,000. In January of 1998, Theatre Workshop’s cash reserves numbered ~NZD\$42,000, which by March had dwindled to ~NZD\$35,000. Though Theatre Workshop had arranged for NZD\$2,000 of miscellaneous losses to be covered by a third party, the deficit would remain woefully outstanding. Minifie affirmed that though Theatre Workshop’s intentions were to “clear its coffers”, the remaining sum of NZD\$9,055.63 would need to be shouldered by the University of Auckland’s Student Affairs lest Theatre Workshop declare bankruptcy.

¹ Meeting of Association of Community Theatres, Sunday 29th February, Monday, 1st March, 1976, NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14, Association of Community Theatres 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

² Record of a meeting held Friday 8th March 1986 between representatives of QEII Arts Council, Theatre corporate and Mercury Theatre. Series 14, Box 12. Theatre Corporate and Mercury Theatre - Chase Development. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

³ Financial statement for Macbeth. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare budgets, 1995 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

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



Photograph of Paul Minifie requesting financial aid from student affairs, 1998. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3.. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

On March 14, the curtains would close on *Coriolanus* for the final time, and Theatre Workshop would begin picking up the pieces. By May 12, the dust had settled, Theatre Workshop reported a final deficit of NZD\$22,434.⁵ To add insult to injury, the 1998 Fringe Festival, a showcase of Theatre Workshop's more avant-garde productions, would have an unusually terrible financial performance. Historically reporting a deficit falling within the low hundreds, 98' was the year they would lose NZD\$ 2,141.⁶ Accounting for administration expenses, 98' will forever be the year that Theatre Workshop lost NZD\$ 27,623 – the coffers were well and truly cleared.⁷

Theatre Workshop would suffer a further setback on August 10, receiving word that their proposal to form a board had been rejected after *Coriolanus*' poor performance had failed to restore confidence in the financial viability of Summer Shakespeare following their lacklustre 96' and 97' performances.⁸ This notice headlined Theatre Workshop's 98' annual general meeting, alongside the demoralising announcement that membership was at an unprecedented low due to the 97' Summer Shakespeare producer's failure to enrol that production's cast and crew.⁹ Theatre Workshop would reflect that coercing Summer Shakespeare's metamorphosis from an amateur, student-driven venture to an imitation of professional theatre was ultimately an

⁵ Financial statement for *Coriolanus*.

⁶ Financial statement for *Coriolanus*.

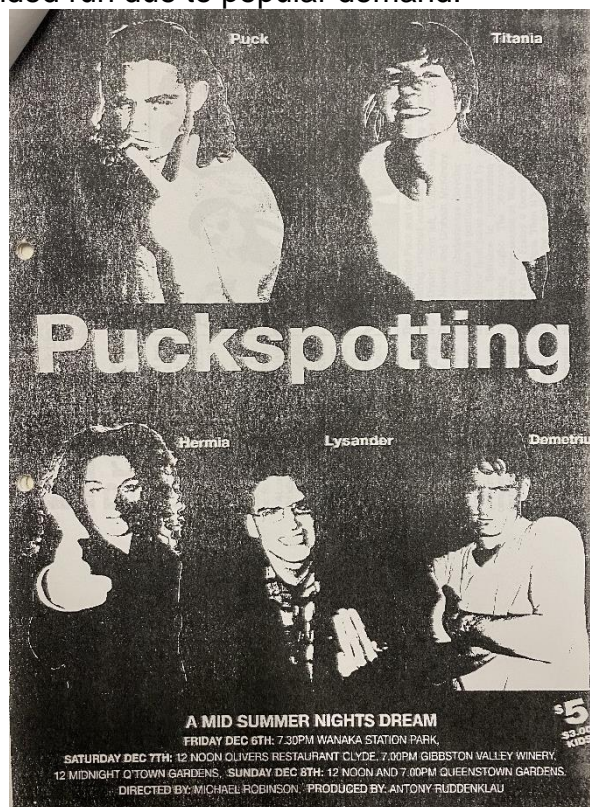
⁷ Index to the financial statements for the period ended 31/07/98. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 4. Auckland University Theatre Workshop Records ca 1992-2001. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

⁸ Theatre Workshop Annual General Meeting 1998. MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

⁹ Theatre Workshop Annual General Meeting 1998.

expensive failure to reproduce the success of *As You Like It* in 95'. Hence, Theatre Workshop would assert that proposals for the 99' production should be mindful of creating opportunities for student involvement.¹⁰ Returning to Summer Shakespeare's roots offered a moment of soul searching to reevaluate what made 95' a smash hit, if not its outlying production value.

While Summer Shakespeare had fallen into disarray and something of an identity crisis since 95', the same could not be said for its director. After the success of *As You Like It*, Michael Robinson had returned to the South Island to nurture his improv company, The Court Jesters. Despite a historically exceptional Summer Shakespeare production, Robinson had apparently not quite wrung 95' dry of fortune as The Court Jesters would go on to win the World Theatresports Championship in Los Angeles that same year.¹¹ In 1996, Robinson would submit a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the Queenstown Shakespeare Festival, an event Robinson was considered a respected and regular entrant. Robinson's rendition, *Puckspotting*, comprised an amateur cast yet impressed attendees with impeccable comedic timing and magnetic personalities.¹² While Summer Shakespeare had endured a gruelling 1998, Robinson had triumphantly directed a two-person show on a shoestring budget. *Bare* received such critical acclaim that the production enjoyed sold-out performances, over-capacity crowds, and an extended run due to popular demand.¹³



Photograph of promotional material for Puckspotting. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 22. of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

¹⁰ Theatre Workshop Annual General Meeting 1998.

¹¹ Michael Robinson, "Mini-Bio" IMDB. Accessed January 14, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0732918/bio/?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

¹² Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Introduction. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

¹³ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Low Budget.



Photograph of promotional material for Bare. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 22. of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

Robinson was a well-established directorial force before 95', while Summer Shakespeare may have given him a platform, calling it a big break would undermine the prior success and acknowledgements he had enjoyed. It was safe to say Theatre Workshop needed Robinson a lot more than Robinson needed Theatre Workshop, but Robinson refused to shy away. Amidst a series of consecutive, career-defining accomplishments, and while actively directing another project, *3 People at the Cinema*,¹⁴ Robinson submitted a proposal for the 99' Summer Shakespeare.

Robinson proposed an adaption of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, highly derivative of his 96' production, *Puckspotting*. While Robinson described *Puckspotting* as a modern-day skier soap opera in the backdrop of Queenstown's slopes, the 99' production would forgo reimaging elements in favour of a classical execution.¹⁵ Robinson recognised that *Coriolanus*' fallout had constrained budgets beyond a point he could comfortably take creative risks. Theatre Workshop had requested Summer Shakespeare return to its roots,¹⁶ and given the circumstances Robinson had little choice. Robinson would emphasise that a slim budget would not necessarily compromise quality, and that an excellent performance will speak for itself. To that end, the show would sacrifice luxuries that Summer Shakespeare had become accustomed to, particularly set design, which would only call for a single scaffolding structure and six lamps. Though this decision may appear to border on reckless abandon, Robinson's project 98', *Bare*, forwent traditional set dressings, props and

¹⁴ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Production.

¹⁵ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Production.

¹⁶ Theatre Workshop Annual General Meeting 1998.

costuming aside from a singular ladder and chair, a bold choice that critics had raved over.¹⁷ Conveniently, the budget saved would be allocated elsewhere on radio microphones, as Robinson identified failure to announce in outdoor spaces as a common issue amongst amateur theatre circles.¹⁸

Also included in Robinson's Summer Shakespeare proposal was a case for University of Auckland (UoA) graduate Wade Jackson to produce the project. Beyond his academic relationship with UoA, Jackson made for an ideal, almost poetic candidate for producer, given his involvement with Auckland University Students' Association Comedy and Improv Club. During Jackson's final year of study in 1997, he found himself elected club president, a responsibility that would have been far less daunting had the club not been teetering on financial ruin. Jackson would nearly singlehandedly preserve the economic future of the club via rigorous community outreach and dedication to producing high-quality events. This feat would win Jackson the prestigious UoA Club Administrator of the Year award in 97'. Jackson's catalogue of accomplishments went on and on; producer and publicist for the 97' Comedy Awards, which involved managing upwards of NZD\$20,000 excluding thousands more in giveaway prizes, produced an internationally renowned set at the International Laugh Festival, founded and managed late-night comedy troupe, The Improv Bandits, and last but not least, was actively coordinating with Robinson as a producer on the aforementioned *3 People at the Cinema*.¹⁹

The rest should have played out like theatre. Theatre Workshop would select Robinson's proposal, put on a show that finally replicated the success of 95', reinstalling Theatre Workshop's confidence in the financial viability of low-budget, student-centric Summer Shakespeare endeavours. But happy endings rarely make for good theatre. Perhaps it was because Robinson touted himself too highly for the tastes of Theatre Workshop. Interspersed throughout Robinson's proposal are moments lambasting Theatre Workshop's dilettante attitude toward professional theatre. Robinson explicitly stated that "An amateur like Theatre Workshop cannot realistically be expected to sustain huge costs for an annual major production".²⁰ This statement oozes passive aggression, but contextually reads outright disdainfully considering Robinson's earlier assertion that regardless of the weather's effect on commerciality, *Coriolanus* was already a critical failure owing to Theatre Workshop's poor selection of "inexperienced" directors.²¹ Conceivably, what Robinson viewed as cautionary, Theatre Workshop took for righteousness, ultimately rejecting Robinson's proposal in favour of Ben Crowder and Vanessa Chapple's own submission for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

¹⁷ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Low Budget.

¹⁸ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Student Involvement.

¹⁹ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Production.

²⁰ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Low Budget.

²¹ Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Quality.



Photograph of promotional material for *The Young Baron*, Crowder and Chapple featured centrally. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 22. of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

By contrast, Crowder and Chapple proposed a visual and aurally spectacular performance, one they promised would "...put Theatre Workshop's Summer Shakespeare at the leading edge of New Zealand Theatre."²² Like a moth to a flame, Theatre Workshop failed to resist the allure of such an esteemed position. Despite a relatively vague proposal, Theatre Workshop would award the 99' show to Crowder and Chapple, who, to their credit, possessed an impressive directorial portfolio.²³ Even so, it is challenging not to consider the elephant in the room. Robinson had bruised Theatre Workshop's ego, who remained unwilling to wake up from their dream even as it crumbled around them. A dream Crowder and Chapple offered to extend, if only for another summer.

Production began very budget conscious, a reality Theatre Workshop struggled acclimating to. In one such example Theatre Workshop administrator Derek Webber would openly disparage the 99' promotional poster for being boring.²⁴ This behaviour is especially appalling given not only was the design completed in good faith by a professional for free, but that Webber's qualm stemmed from the poster being bicolour, a specific request in the design brief to reduce printing costs.²⁵ On January 12, only a

²² *The One that Got Away* - Vanessa and Ben's 99' Summer Shakespeare proposal. June 1998. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 21. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

²³ *The One that Got Away* - Vanessa and Ben's 99' Summer Shakespeare proposal.

²⁴ Summer Shakespeare Production Meeting (26 November 1998). MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

²⁵ Summer Shakespeare Production Meeting (26 November 1998).

month before opening night, Theatre Workshop projected *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to have a budget ceiling of NZD\$56,000,²⁶ comparatively much smaller than *Coriolanus*' NZD\$86,665.²⁷ Between this time and the production's end in mid-March, that budget had jumped to an excessive NZD\$85,334.²⁸ The most egregious leap in expenditure was crew expenses increasing from a modest NZD\$10,900 to NZD\$27,371, once more proving Theatre Workshop's inability to resist the siren song of professional services.

The production would ultimately sell out to 10,000 people²⁹ over the season and generate a healthy profit of NZD\$16,680.20 for Theatre Workshop.³⁰ However, in the greater picture of Summer Shakespeare, 99' heralded a forsaking of truly small-scale productions revolving around student involvement in favour of attempting to produce shows of a professional calibre. If anything, the relative success of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* compared to 97's *Macbeth* emboldened Theatre Workshop to insist on running two separate productions for their 2000' Summer Shakespeare.³¹ The Theatre Workshop of 2000 bore no resemblance to the version of themselves just six years prior which had been satisfied living up to its reputation as an amateur theatre. Despite Robinson's direction proving that success could still be found in small-scale productions, Theatre Workshop insisted on presenting professionally, even if the cost of doing so narrowed their margins significantly. Whether they were willing to admit it or not, Theatre Workshop had become comfortable living beyond their means if only for the opportunity to rub shoulders with greatness. And so, the venture established to generate revenue resigned itself to a life of voluntary starving artistry, all for the chance to be remembered for more than they were.

Summer Shakespeare's brush with stardom fundamentally altered how they viewed themselves and their obligations. Summer Shakespeare was initially established so that Theatre Workshop could use profits to bankroll smaller, independent productions representing a financial risk. The refusal of Theatre Workshop leaders to scale back expenses or accept Robinson's proposal indicate a rejection not only of their amateur roots, but of their purpose. This philosophy, to walk the path of a starving artist for a chance in the spotlight, is paralleled by contemporary amateur theatres of the past. Tāmaki Makaurau's own Theatre Corporate was frequently unable to pay their actors a fair wage³² and like Theatre Workshop, refused lifelines until they were first on the verge of closure in 1975.³³ The willingness of Theatre Corporate's troupe to stand by

²⁶ 1999 Summer Shakespeare 12/01/99. MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

²⁷ Financial statement for *Coriolanus*.

²⁸ Theatre Workshop Incorporated 1999 Summer Shakespeare Production Income and Expenditure Budget (actual post-production values). MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 3. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

²⁹ Summer Shakespeare 2000 Meeting (20/05/99). MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

³⁰ Theatre Workshop Incorporated 1999 Summer Shakespeare Production Income and Expenditure Budget (actual post-production values).

³¹ Summer Shakespeare 2000 Meeting (4/07/24). MSS. Archives 2008/11. Item 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

³² Linda Cartwright, "Women in Auckland Who Worked In The Acting Profession Talk About Their Lives Project" by Jean Hyland. (June 16, 2005). Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

³³ Response from Department of education 21.11.75. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Miscellaneous documents dated 1975. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

their employers despite appropriate proper compensation for their work speaks to the pride practitioners of amateur theatre take in their work, an area that will be explored further in the next article. The allure of the spotlight also explains why these ventures would sooner close than dial back their ambitions once they had a taste of greatness.

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