

Growing Pains: The persistence of emerging theatres.

By Peter Wallace*

“Theatres cannot adjust to economic changes when the goal is to influence the way people think.”

ACT on the financial longevity of community theatres, 1976

Amateur theatres represent something of a Sisyphean dilemma. Their existence is often short lived, the pay is inconsistent,¹ and they compete against professional theatres whom themselves are often forced to close. Theatre Guild New Zealand was a Tāmaki Makaurau based venture established in 1955 by a group of professional theatre circuit veterans, among them Sydney Musgrove,² which ceased operation in 1965.³ The University of Auckland’s Summer Shakespeare finding a niche is an exception unrepresentative of the struggles most amateur theatres faced. This article will explore the admirable lengths amateur theatres went through to keep the lights on between 1975 – 78 and shed light on their relationship their relationship with the government during this time.

It should come as no surprise that performers are ambitious people, given their willingness to forgo the comforts and security of a traditional career in pursuit of contributing to the arts. From an early age, Raymond Hawthorne boasted considerable accomplishments within the performing arts. From humble beginnings clinching victory in a primary school singing competition and performing with the Hawkes Bay community opera in his adolescence, to eventually attaining membership with two of New Zealand’s major professional theatre companies,⁴ Hawthorne going on to bigger things was only to be expected. Eager to break the monopoly that the Mercury Theatre held over Auckland’s live performances, Hawthorne founded Theatre Corporate in Auckland, 1973.⁵ This was so much more than another accomplishment for Hawthorne to check off. It represented a huge financial risk to gather actors, playwrights and technical personnel who shared his vision of “...expressing creative talents, free from commercial pressure.”⁶

Membership to Theatre Corporate was an exclusive privilege under Hawthorne’s leadership, making an initial offering of positions at the year’s start and refusing to invite any new talent until the year’s end.⁷ Exceptions to this rule were only made in the event of a member’s departure, which Hawthorne specifically clarifies to

¹ 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.

² Programme celebrating Theatre Guild’s maiden production. 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.

³ Last documented Theatre Guild production. MSS. Archives. 2013/07. Series 2. File 2/3. Shakespeare, William. Measure For Measure. Performed by Auckland University Drama Society in collaboration with Grafton Theatre Company. Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

⁴ Dionne Christian. “Stage master” *The New Zealand Herald*. October 12, 2015. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/stage-master/QCZEJN7PQDNS5MUU7ALWGGWY3M/>

⁵ History of Theatre Corporate p1. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Theatre Corporate Rules and regulations 1974. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

⁶ History of Theatre Corporate, p1.

⁷ History of Theatre Corporate, p2.

encompass expulsion, resignation, or death. This resulted in the culture at Theatre Corporate better resembling a family than a troupe.⁸

Although macabre, the inclusion is hardly uncharacteristic for artists best known for their dramatics. Furthermore, the notion reflects Hawthorne's philosophy of creating a community of tight-knit individuals.

At this time, Theatre Corporate was running medium-scale productions on thin margins, charging only \$2 for children, \$3 for students and \$4 for adults.⁹ Theatre Corporate tended to produce shows from local and internal playwrights with broad appeal to take advantage of their pricing model, which proved an especially viable strategy given Auckland's large population. In addition to this income, Theatre Corporate received an annual grant from the Arts Council to subsidise their operational costs and generally improve margins. Yet despite this, Theatre Corporate operated at a loss, albeit a manageable one, for their first two years of production. Theatre Corporate would initiate the first of many exchanges with the government, requesting additional funding to correct their financial trajectory. In 1975, Hawthorne wrote to the Department of Education (DoE), requesting approval as recipients of the "Performers in School" grant in the amount of NZD\$13,870 (approximately NZD\$172K today). Although the application was declined for being too vague, the DoE were supportive of Hawthorne and encouraged him to reapply in the future.¹⁰

Unswayed by this rejection, Theatre Corporate would acquire a new rehearsal space in 1976, agreeing to a rent of NZD\$6,000 p.a., subject to increase after the first two years on an eight-year lease.¹¹ Contrary to Theatre Corporate's uncertain financial future, members were excited by the expansion, perhaps optimistic that with this acquisition, Theatre Corporate's image would develop from a group of amateurs into a legitimate and professional operation.

And so, the monkey paw curled. Theatre Corporate's financial difficulties reflected a broader national trend. Compounded by murmurings that 1977 would be a bleak year for arts funding,¹² theatres across the country would suffer greatly unless some power were to intervene. In early 1976, the Association of Community Theatres (ACT) formed as an effort to unite a concerned body of individuals seeking an audience with a government representative.¹³ Alongside several large regional theatres, Hawthorne was invited to join ACT on behalf of Theatre Corporate, provided he would support their statements concerning the grim financial future of theatres nationwide. In February 1976, the ACT executive met with Minister of the Arts Alan Highet to discuss the unanimous need for additional funding to the Arts Council lest those theatres in

⁸ History of Theatre Corporate, p2.

⁹ Minutes of Third Annual General Meeting of ACT held 23 & 24 September 1978, p4-5. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. ACT 1978. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Lease from Oliver. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Lease of premises 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

¹² Letter to the Member Theatre by Nonita Rees dated 12th May, 1976. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Association of Community Theatres 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

¹³ Meeting of ACT, Sunday 2th Feb, Monday 1st March 1976. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Association of Community Theatres 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

more dire straits risk closure. Highest was sympathetic to the ACT's plight, reassuring that he would directly protect funds reserved for practising artists being poached by the government budget to cover logistical expenses.¹⁴

Hightet also affirmed that for all his advocacy, the government would not increase the Arts Council's funding in 1977.¹⁵ This hesitation was due to the economic fallout of the global oil crises which had forced New Zealand into a recession by 1976.¹⁶ The subsequent decline massively slowed economic growth and incentivised the government to fund sectors that were surefire to promote economic activity, of which the arts was not. To worsen matters, emergency funds available to the Arts Council were extremely limited.¹⁷ This information caused a considerable stir within the ACT and it was evident that a new strategy would be required if they hoped to survive. Members made audacious proposals to the Arts Council, among them that gifts to theatres be tax deductible and that funding for the Sports and Recreation Fund be redirected to the Arts Council.¹⁸ Despite their increasingly apparent desperation, Hightet politely dismissed the plausibility of these schemes due to the government's strict controls on budgeting.¹⁹

This was a disappointing revelation for members of the ACT, many of whom had hoped that the struggle of 1976 would be remembered as the dark before the dawn. Consequently, significant expansions planned for 1977 needed to be scaled back.²⁰ In addition to their new rehearsal space, Theatre Corporate had planned to increase their annual expenditure by NZD\$39,520 despite operating a deficit of NZD\$13,890 while drawing budgets.²¹ In their financial forecast for 1976, Theatre Corporate reported an expected expenditure of NZD\$225,590. Based on Theatre Corporate's income projections which assumed a 60% average show capacity, they would still require a NZD\$82,250 grant from the Art's Council just to break even.²² To Hawthorne, a funding cut from the Arts Council represented a compromise in his vision of "...expressing creative talents free from commercial pressure..." a compromise he could not tolerate. Yet Hawthorne had few financial options, and he could only watch as bureaucratic factors beyond his control sundered the community he had forged.

In May 1976, the ACT received a final letter from Hightet stating that they should prepare to weather out the oncoming economic storm, stressing that although the situation seemed grave, other cultural organisations were suffering far worse financial

¹⁴ Correspondence between Nonita and Hightet, 22 March, 97'. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Association of Community Theatres 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

¹⁵ Correspondence between Nonita and Hightet, 22 March, 97'.

¹⁶ New Zealand History. "The 1970s: 1973 - key events." Accessed February 22, 2024.

[https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/the-](https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/the-1970s/1973#:~:text=This%20first%20oil%20shock%20(a,condensate%20for%20use%20as%20fuel.)

[1970s/1973#:~:text=This%20first%20oil%20shock%20\(a,condensate%20for%20use%20as%20fuel.](https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/the-1970s/1973#:~:text=This%20first%20oil%20shock%20(a,condensate%20for%20use%20as%20fuel.)

¹⁷ Letter to the Member Theatre by Nonita Rees.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Letter to the Member Theatre by Nonita Rees.

²⁰ Theatre Corporate, Letter to Malcolm Rickard (Director of Arts council) dated 11 October, 1976, p1-2. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Correspondence with QEII Arts Council 76-77. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

²¹ Theatre Corporate, Letter to Malcolm Rickard, p1-2.

²² Theatre Corporate, Letter to Malcolm Rickard, p5.

losses.²³ In response, the ACT finally complied. Once rich with brainstorming and rallying, meetings were reduced to complacent cost-cutting analysis. Besides the ACT firing a petty shot at the Arts Council by refusing to acknowledge their continued support and assistance, the remainder of 1976 came and went. By February 1977, the ACT had acclimated to their reality that, while no longer immediately threatening, was certainly depressing for the ambitious artists.²⁴ Members of the ACT began channelling their depression into a quickly growing disdain for the Arts Council, whom they had come to blame. In March of 1977, the organisation's monthly minutes recorded the statement that "[The ACT] is not really confident the Arts Council has the staff to make decisions".²⁵

While discontent for the Arts Council was at an all-time high, Theatre Corporate found themselves in an enviable position. On February 11, Theatre Corporate had sent a plea to the Arts Council outlining their bleak financial situation, followed by an explicit admission that Theatre Corporate was on the verge of closure on February 14.²⁶ In response, the Arts Council would not only approve Theatre Corporate's earlier "Performers in School" grant up to the amount of NZD\$9,825 – but had effectively emptied their emergency funds to scrape together NZD\$57,000 so Theatre Corporate could stabilise their finances.²⁷ Hight had been a personal advocate for Theatre Corporate during this decision, mainly because Hight admired Hawthorne's prideful philosophy, which stood out amongst a catalogue of theatres who wanted help but would not help themselves.²⁸ Besides their 1995 "Performers in School" grant request, which was denied, Theatre Corporate had never requested a government kickback or handout until they were facing termination, help was undoubtedly overdue. While Theatre Corporate breathed a sigh of relief, their comrades in the ACT remained hungry for recompense and expected Theatre Corporate to join them in the battle

²³ Letter to the Member Theatre by Nonita Rees

²⁴ Minutes of a general meeting ACT 5th and 6th of March 1977, p6. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Association of Community Theatres 1977. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

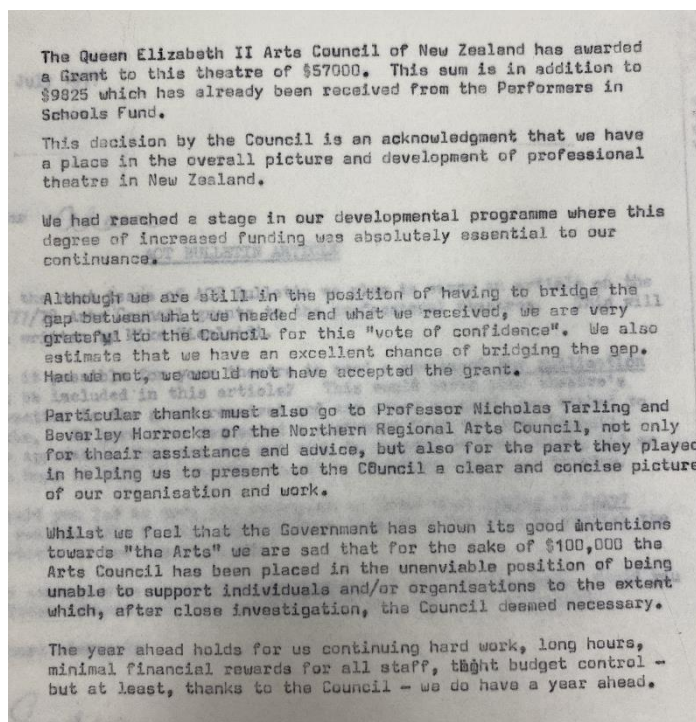
²⁵ Minutes of a general meeting ACT 5th and 6th of March 1977, p6.

²⁶ Present Situation - Theatre Corporate 14th Feb 1977. To Hamish Keith of the Arts Council from Freeman. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Correspondence with QEII Arts Council 76-77. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

²⁷ Present Situation - Theatre Corporate

²⁸ Letter from Hight to Freeman, 31 May 1976. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Correspondence with QEII Arts Council 76-77. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

against penny-pinching parliamentarians. Ultimately, Theatre Corporate would not hesitate to bite the hand that had fed them.



The Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand has awarded a Grant to this theatre of \$57000. This sum is in addition to \$9825 which has already been received from the Performers in Schools Fund.

This decision by the Council is an acknowledgment that we have a place in the overall picture and development of professional theatre in New Zealand.

We had reached a stage in our developmental programme where this degree of increased funding was absolutely essential to our continuance.

Although we are still in the position of having to bridge the gap between what we needed and what we received, we are very grateful to the Council for this "vote of confidence". We also estimate that we have an excellent chance of bridging the gap. Had we not, we would not have accepted the grant.

Particular thanks must also go to Professor Nicholas Tarling and Beverley Horrocks of the Northern Regional Arts Council, not only for their assistance and advice, but also for the part they played in helping us to present to the Council a clear and concise picture of our organisation and work.

Whilst we feel that the Government has shown its good intentions towards "the Arts" we are sad that for the sake of \$100,000 the Arts Council has been placed in the unenviable position of being unable to support individuals and/or organisations to the extent which, after close investigation, the Council deemed necessary.

The year ahead holds for us continuing hard work, long hours, minimal financial rewards for all staff, tight budget control - but at least, thanks to the Council - we do have a year ahead.

Photograph of letter informing Theatre Corporate of the Arts Council's funding. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Correspondence with QEII Arts Council 76-77. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

ACT's negotiations with the Arts Council resumed, although on much less cordial terms. ACT member Mr Brown drafted an aggressive press statement designed to expose the Art Council's inaction, a copy of which would be addressed to every member of parliament. Unconvinced that one singular copy each would garner a level of response ACT deemed appropriate, each member would send their own copy to every MP.²⁹ The result was an exigent bombardment befitting the work of theatre representatives. The telegram was sent on March 11, and responses began steadily filing in on March 18. Although many of the replies had been carefully tailored to maintain a united front of MP's, the Labour Party Caucus Cultural Committee had come out in public support of ACT and lent their cause sympathy.³⁰ This prompted ACT to contact Highet once again, confident that an increased profile could pressure a compromise. Highet's response is somewhat agitated, particularly because the ACT had implied that the Arts Council did not desire to assist the arts.³¹ The ACT quickly

²⁹ Minutes of a general meeting ACT 5th and 6th of March 1977: Publicity about government funding, p8.

³⁰ Letter dated 28th March 1977 between Raymond Hawthorne and Nonita Rees. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Funding 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

³¹ Inland telegram from Allan Highet, Minister for the Arts. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Funding 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

walked back this implication in their reply but remained firm, leveraging their favour with the Labour Party Caucus Cultural Committee to arrange a future meeting.

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INLAND TELEGRAM

73514H-49,000pads/12/75 D

YOU MAY BE SURE THAT I AM MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO OBTAIN MORE FUNDS FOR THE ARTS COUNCIL SO THAT IT IS BETTER ABLE TO ASSIST ALL THE ARTS STOP I DO NOT APPRECIATE THE IMPLICATION IN YOUR LAST SENTENCE STOP IT WOULD =

73514H-49,000pads/12/75 D

BE QUITE IMPROPER FOR ME TO INTERFERE IN ANY WAY WITH THE COUNCILS INDEPENDENCE OF ACTION STOP I CAN ONLY TRY MY BEST TO ENSURE THAT THESE RESOURCES ARE ADEQUATE STOP =

ALLAN HIGHET MINISTER FOR THE ARTS +

Photograph of Highet's response. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Funding 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

11 March 1977

The Hon. Mr Allan Highet
Minister for the Arts
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON.

Dear Mr Highet

Thank you for your telegram. The Association of Community Theatres is of course confident of and most grateful for your interest and support for the arts.

The purpose of the telegram and press statement sent out from the community theatres was to draw the attention of the public and Members of Parliament on both sides of the House to the absolute necessity of increasing funding to the arts this coming financial year. We feel that we must do everything in our power to publicise the critical situation faced by all of the professional theatres. We are not suggesting that we are dealt with unfairly by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council in terms of the proportion of the funds that are allocated to the theatres. The Council is simply under funded to give adequate support to its clients.

Since we sent our telegrams we have been approached by the Labour Party Caucus Committee on Cultural Affairs and invited to outline our situation. This we have agreed to do, but we should welcome the opportunity to make the same information available to the Government.

Yours sincerely,

Nonnita Rees
Secretary
Association of Community Theatres.

Photograph of the ACT's response to Highet. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Funding 1976. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

The repercussions of Brown's telegram are hard to measure. Going into the 1978 financial year, Theatre Corporate requested NZD\$94,200 and received NZD\$65,000. Comparatively, ACT member Mercury Theatre, the largest commercial theatre in New Zealand, requested NZD\$220,000 and received NZD\$200,000.³² It is evident that the ACT was unsatisfied with how the Arts Council had ended negotiations, as the ACT's 1978 financial plan revolved around a scheme to lobby the Arts Council for additional funding while simultaneously blaming their miserliness for the decline of educational and indigenous theatre.³³ In any case, the hatchet went unburied.

Summer Shakespeare enjoyed its niche until their 1995 season which drastically altered their priorities and consequently acquainted them with familiar struggle of amateur theatres. Despite Summer Shakespeare having the option to reprise their pre-1995 style of small-scale student centric performances, they would continue to chase their ambitions until closure in 2016. Without context on the attitudes of amateur theatres this decision is easy to disregard as wildly illogical, but the actions of Theatre Corporate provide new insight. They financed a new rehearsal space in 1976 despite lacking a financial safety net following their grant request being rejected in 1975. They rejected financial aid until being on the brink of closure. They fought a multi-year battle against the Arts Council all while doing three performances daily with a troupe they could not afford to compensate fairly. Camus remarked that Sisyphus' struggle toward the heights is enough to fill the man's heart,³⁴ even knowing the boulder will inevitably roll back down. Similarly, an amateur theatre sees the inhospitable scape around them and acknowledges the inevitable, choosing to prioritising self-fulfilment over financial-fulfilment. To a man like Raymond Hawthorne that meant "...expressing creative talents, free from commercial pressure.", an adage most amateur theatres adopt, if only subconsciously. This explains actions an outsider might dismiss as unusual or foolish. Money will come and go, but the legacies of performances will long outlive the fleeting instalments of amateur theatre.

³² Minutes of Third Annual General Meeting of ACT held 23 & 24 September 1978, p4-5. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. ACT 1978. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

³³ Minutes of meeting 26th and 27th Feb, 1978, p5. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. ACT 1978. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

³⁴ Albert Camus. 2000. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. Penguin Modern Classics. London, England: Penguin Classics.

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Shakespeare, William. Measure For Measure. Performed by Auckland University
Drama Society in collaboration with Grafton Theatre Company. Auckland
Special Collections, Auckland.

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Collections. Auckland.