

Where Good Things Go to Die: Requiem for the Dramatist.

By Peter Wallace\*

*“The seats are empty. The theatre is dark. Why do you keep acting?”*

*From Come On In!: New Poems, Charles Bukowski, 2006.*

In 2000 after five years of disappointing financial reporting, the University of Auckland’s Summer Shakespeare was prepared to undertake a massive risk to break the cycle. In 1986 Theatre Corporate after years of being unable to pay their cast and crew according to their contracts would not so much as flinch when one of their final reliable streams of income was cut off. In 2020 the Pop-up Globe would face a global pandemic which immediately ceased all productions. Although these events occurred independently years apart, in the face of overwhelming odds, all three Tāmaki Makaurau based theatres fought until the bitter end. This essay will breakdown the events leading up to the closure of each theatre and attempt to answer why amateur theatre in Tāmaki Makaurau seems doomed to fail.

## **Summer Shakespeare**

Following an albeit underwhelming financial success at the 99’ Summer Shakespeare, the path down which Theatre Workshop would walk had been committed. Director Ben Crowder’s assurance that Summer Shakespeare had to the potential to be “at the leading edge of New Zealand Theatre”<sup>1</sup> fed deeply into Theatre Workshop’s notions of grandeur, eliminating any prospect of returning to student focused, amateur theatre. In June 1999, Theatre Workshop began accepting proposals for the 2000’ Summer Shakespeare. Perhaps roused by the relative fortune of 99’ and eager to maintain momentum, for the season in 2000, Theatre Workshop donned wax wings and announced that Summer Shakespeare would produce not one, but two plays.<sup>2</sup>

Since establishing in 1963, Summer Shakespeare had never attempted running multiple productions in a single season,<sup>3</sup> the very notion was extremely intimidating from a logistical standpoint. Theatre Workshop intended commissioning two separate directors, each with their personal vision and production staff – effectively doubling the necessary coordination efforts. The two selected productions were *The Taming of the*

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<sup>1</sup> The One that Got Away. Vannesa and Ben’s 1999 Summer Shakespeare proposal. June 1998. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. Production proposals for Summer Shakespeare., 1999 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>2</sup> Announcement for submission of 2000 Summer Shakespeare directorial proposals. Identifier: MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 2. File 2. Theatre Workshop and Summer Shakespeare meetings. Agendas and minutes., 1995 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>3</sup> Announcement for submission of 2000 Summer Shakespeare directorial proposals. Identifier: MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 2. File 2. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

*Shrew* to be directed by Gary Steadman and Julie Nolan,<sup>4</sup> and *Henry V* as directed by Sam Trubridge.<sup>5</sup> Theatre Workshop elected for a total budget of ~NZD\$70,000 split between the two shops. Based on early budget projections, Steadman and Nolan would receive the lion's share (NZD\$46,300) whilst Theatre Workshop had negotiated that Trubridge would operate on an initial floor of NZD\$17,000.<sup>6</sup> In their proposal, Trubridge outlined their comfort working within smaller budgets, but prefer to use all resources that could be afforded. The floor would be pushed to NZD\$22,450 following Nolan and Steadman's confirmation that their budget allowed them to forgo ~NZD\$1,000, and Trubridge being granted premature access to the contingency fund.<sup>7</sup>

It is crucial to understand that Theatre Workshop selection of proposals for *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Henry V* was largely motivated by their stylistic disparity. Trubridge was renowned for his modern interpretations, envisioning *Henry V* as a punkish rivalry between two street gangs brought to life by leather jackets, pyrotechnics and a bus that would drive on stage mid performance.<sup>8</sup> Contrarily, Steadman and Nolan were more interested in traditional renditions, which made for complimentary performances

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<sup>4</sup> The Taming of the Shrew Proposal, Summer Shakespeare 2000. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. Production proposals for Summer Shakespeare., 1999 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Trubridge's proposal for the 2000 Summer Shakespeare; King Henry the Fifth. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. Production proposals for Summer Shakespeare., 1999 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>6</sup> Summer Shakespeare 2000 Budget. 28/11/99. Identifier: MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements., 1994 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>7</sup> 1999 Summer Shakespeare 12/01/99. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3. File 4. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Trubridge's proposal for the 2000 Summer Shakespeare; King Henry the Fifth. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

in terms of appealing to a broader audience.<sup>9</sup> Despite this sound reasoning, the 2000 Summer Shakespeare would end the season in a deficit of NZD\$9,732.<sup>10</sup>



Sketch of Trubridge's proposed set design. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

So often Summer Shakespeare left Theatre Workshop wondering what went wrong, and so often the failure can be attributed to financial management. In early budgetary discussions Theatre Workshop agreed that including for contingencies, spending should not exceed NZD\$70,000 – a modest sum compared to the preceding year's performance of *Macbeth* at NZD\$85,334.<sup>11</sup> Alas, as George Santayana once mused that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," the ghosts of Summer Shakespeare past would come to rear its head. For just as how Crowder had teased *Macbeth's* budget upward from an initial NZD\$56,000, Theatre Workshop would eventually spend a total NZD\$82,943 in preparation for the 2000 Summer Shakespeare. While the production cost of *The Taming of the Shrew* would increase

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<sup>9</sup> The Taming of the Shrew Proposal, Summer Shakespeare 2000. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>10</sup> 2000 Summer Shakespeare Profit and Loss statement 1/04/99 through 30/06/00. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements., 1994 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>11</sup> Theatre Workshop Incorporated 1999 Summer Shakespeare Production Income and Expenditure Budget (actual post-production values). Series 3. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements., 1994 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

from NZD\$45,521 to NZD\$ 50,492,<sup>12</sup> *Henry V* would leap from NZD\$22,450 to NZD\$32,451,<sup>13</sup> a decision that would prove damning.

To understand why Theatre Workshop would commit what seems an egregious mismanagement of funds, the underlying conditions of Steadman and Nolan's employment must be considered. Both had been personally recommended by past Summer Shakespeare director, Ben Crowder, particularly Nolan for her work as assistant director on 1999's *Macbeth*.<sup>14</sup> The circumstances of *Macbeth* were highly tense, Theatre Workshop literally relying on a successful show to prevent bankruptcy after a catastrophic 98' season. It is feasible to say that for essentially saving Theatre Workshop, Crowder ascended to a somewhat mythologised figure whose word held unusual weight. Crowder's endorsement of Nolan highlighted that they had both graduated from the John Bolton School of Theatre and past success working together.<sup>15</sup> Conceivably, Theatre Workshop hoped that Crowder's explicit approval and similar directorial attitudes would recreate the success of *Macbeth*. Hence, when Nolan sought additional funding just as Crowder had before her, Theatre Workshop exercised little restraint. This was in spite of Steadman and Nolan's relative inexperience, Nolan having only one credit directing and Steadman with only co-devising experience.<sup>16</sup> In the spirit of Santayana, one might recall how accomplished director Michael Robinson had spurned Theatre Workshop in 99' regarding their negligence toward selecting qualified directors,<sup>17</sup> a habit Robinson claimed contributed to the 98' catastrophe. Hence it is hard not to imagine Robinson shaking his head were he to learn that the 00' performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* would produce a deficit of NZD\$7,392.

Conversely, Trubridge's *Henry V* failed for an entirely different reason. If 2000's *The Taming of the Shrew* is a cautionary tale of the dangers that come with sternly abiding tradition, *Henry V* is remarkably the opposite. Since his proposal's acceptance, Trubridge's vision had grown to include live motorbikes for stage entries and exits, as well as several derelict cars to be left on stage to serve simultaneously as lighting and scenery.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not Trubridge's ambition that was his downfall, but how he portrayed the story. While *Henry V* was universally praised in reviews for costuming,

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<sup>12</sup> Taming of the Shrew Profit and Loss statement. 1/04/99 through 30/06/00. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements., 1994 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>13</sup> Henry V Profit and Loss Statement 1/04/99 through 30/06/00. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 3. File 4. TW and Summer Shakespeare balance sheets and financial statements., 1994 – 2000. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>14</sup> The Taming of the Shrew Proposal, Summer Shakespeare 2000. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>15</sup> The Taming of the Shrew Proposal, Summer Shakespeare 2000.

<sup>16</sup> The Taming of the Shrew Proposal, Summer Shakespeare 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Robinson's Proposal for the 36th Annual Outdoor Summer Shakespeare, Introduction. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Item 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Trubridge's proposal for the 2000 Summer Shakespeare; King Henry the Fifth. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

score, and artistic direction, Trubridge himself was slaughtered for the narrative liberties he had taken. In the climactic scene in which Henry awkwardly courts an unreciprocating Catherine, Trubridge opted to depict the scene as a violent, borderline sexual assault. Reviewers took offense that Trubridge had betrayed the source material for little other reason than shock value and needless subversiveness.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Trubridge's proposal reveals concerning explanations for his narrative decisions. In one appalling example, Trubridge reasons that in the play's final scene, Catherine (whom Trubridge describes as a "booty bride"), having now joined the English gang will weep alone on stage, her hair cut short and dyed, her face adorned with piercings, and wearing "hideous makeup". Trubridge suggested this would be an effective allegory for young women who compromised their style and nature to gain acceptance within particular groups.<sup>20</sup> For being misogynistic, condescending and making Trubridge's attitudes towards alternative subcultures abundantly clear, Trubridge's agenda would ultimately result... - in alienating the target demographic for a punkish rendition of *Henry V*, which in turn contributed to a deficit of NZD\$2,340.

### **Katherine**

Katherine's role within the storyline is engineered toward her appearance in the last scene as Henry's booty bride. What may be a happy ending for the French king and Henry is the beginning of the heartbreak for Katherine. Her first scene will portray her as a gentle, joyful personality; jesting with her maid about the crudity of the English language. Her costume at this stage will be nothing like the rest of the costumes, perhaps something whimsical and expressive of a carefree feminine spirit; a flowing white dress for example. In this way her scene becomes a source of comic relief within the play and presents the beauty among the beasts. However in the last scene her hair will have been cut and dyed (she will have been wearing a wig in the previous scene), her face blotched with hideous makeup and her lips, nose and ears pierced with (fake) rings. She can at this stage be partly or fully dressed in gang regalia and leathers or during his courting of her, Henry can garb her with his leather jacket. Thus, Katherine represents the tragedy of this circumstance, where beauty is sacrificed to crudity. In the last moments of the play she will be left on stage, weeping the loss of her freedom and her transition from human being to pawn in the politics of warfare. Her transition also follows and explores the transition many young girls make in identifying themselves with a particular clique; piercings, dyed hair and dress styles are often ways of compromising one's nature to thereby gain acceptance in a particular group.

The role of Katherine in Trubridge's *Henry V* proposal. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

With that, the curtains drew on of Summer Shakespeare 2000, forever immortalised as both the first and last year two productions were attempted. Despite a poor financial performance, as always Summer Shakespeare proved gumptious and continued operation for another sixteen years. It is with great dismay that I report the lore surrounding these years is markedly less delightful than the 1995-2000 period, except for 2002. Unbelievably, 2002 boasted an unsanctioned bikini carwash fundraiser, a sound designer making a female lead cry, and the expulsion of an actor from Summer

<sup>19</sup> "Henry V takes a punkish turn," *The New Zealand Herald*, June 30, 2000.

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/henry-v-takes-a-punkish-turn/ABQZN72O7HDXZXZAO4XUGYUEWA/>

<sup>20</sup> Sam Trubridge's proposal for the 2000 Summer Shakespeare; King Henry the Fifth. MSS. Archives. 2008/11. Series 6. File 22. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

Shakespeare for arriving at a performance blackout drunk.<sup>21</sup> For a festival with such a colourful history, the killing blow (so to speak) could not be more anticlimactic. The year 2016 marked the arrival of the Pop-up Globe which drew interest away from competing Shakespeare performances. After years of attempting to imitate professionals at the edge of New Zealand theatre, Theatre Workshop fell on its sword and discontinued Summer Shakespeare to instead refocus on student performances. A deeply ironic end given Summer Shakespeare's origins as a scheme to finance student performances as part of the University of Auckland's drama program. The fate of Theatre Workshop closely resembled that of Theatre Corporate twenty years prior who had closed not due to competing talent but competing funding.

The following performance one of the cast turned up blind drunk and continued to drink throughout the show, ruining the dance scene and hugely unsettling most of the cast – with tears or threats of violence and in fact only stopped drinking when his bottle was taken from him. The following morning, I told him that he was no longer in the production and performed the role myself for the last 3 shows aided by an earpiece.

Excerpt detailing poor cast conduct Summer Shakespeare 2002. MSS & Archives 2022/13. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

## Theatre Corporate

In the years following 1978, Theatre Corporate would realise that the financial growing pains they had experienced in their first five years of operation were in fact chronic. Until their eventual closure in 1986, Theatre Corporate would fight tooth and nail to maintain any semblance of profitability. Throughout their life, Theatre Corporate had frequently struggled to even pay their actors a fair salary, only able to spare approximately NZD\$30 weekly during rehearsals, and NZD\$50 while touring.<sup>22</sup> Despite living in relative squalor, morale remained high, a feat which can easily be accredited to Raymond Hawthorne, Theatre Corporate founder and living embodiment of the starving artist. Hawthorne established Theatre Corporate with the vision of “expressing creative talents, free from commercial pressure,”<sup>23</sup> a sentiment he and those he worked with would wholly embrace.

Regardless of Theatre Corporate's ability to fairly compensate their employees, more obvious cracks began to flagrantly appear starting in 1980. The first indicator of things taking a turn for the worse was Theatre Corporate's suspension of all tours due to financial strain.<sup>24</sup> As touring was Theatre Corporate's primary stream of income, this

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<sup>21</sup> Much Ado about Nothing directors report Colin Mitchell. MSS & Archives 2022/13. Outdoor Summer Shakespeare Trust Records (1963-2016) 1/1/1. University of Auckland Special Collections, Auckland.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> History of Theatre Corporate p1. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Theatre Corporate Rules and regulations 1974. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

<sup>24</sup> Record of a meeting held Friday 8th March 1986 between representatives of QEII Arts Council, Theatre corporate and Mercury Theatre. NZMS 886 Archive Box 12 Series 14. Theatre Corporate and Mercury Theatre - Chase Development. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

alone would have certainly been their end had they not received a bailout from the Telethon Fund in 1981 that allowed them to resume operation.<sup>25</sup> Theatre Corporate enjoyed three years of relative financial security until 1986 during which the Labour Department unveiled their Community Organisation Grant Scheme (COGS). Until 1986 Theatre Corporate had been a recipient of the Voluntary Organisation Training Program (VOTP), which COGS would directly replace. VOTP had previously been an attractive grant to theatres incorporating some description of teaching program, yet COGS would only be granted by the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) to those deemed providing an essential social service.<sup>26</sup> In a bid to save the financial longevity of Theatre Corporate, director Roger McGill wrote to Minister of Social Welfare Ann Hercus requesting advice. Hercus suggests McGill should attempt legally establishing Theatre Corporate as a training centre, but admits there is no guarantee that the DIA will evaluate a legally recognised training centre anymore essential as a social service.<sup>27</sup>

Threatened by their increasing desperate reality, Theatre Corporate initiated a dialogue with co-concerned theatre, Mercury Theatre. Propositioning to move into a shared space together, both parties could weather out this uncertain period whilst the DIA assessed which organisations qualified for COGS.<sup>28</sup> This venture would never be fully realised due to the closure of Theatre Corporate before the year's end in 1986. While the death of Theatre Corporate may not have had an enormous cultural impact, their presence was certainly missed by schools in the Auckland province. In 1985 Theatre Corporate had been burning the candle at both ends, performing upwards of three daily performances in schools throughout Auckland. Theatre Corporate's work earned them a generous amount of fan mail.<sup>29</sup> Although some letters are clearly begrudgingly written for an English class exercise, many messages are genuine and moving. It is evident that these performances meant a lot to some students by how they vulnerably confide their relation to the material. This is especially poignant considering that Theatre Corporate's subject matter tended to revolve around race relations and family unit problems.<sup>30</sup> Until its untimely termination, Theatre Corporate remained faithful to expressing creative talents, free from commercial pressure. A troupe of starving artists poor in wealth, but rich in all else. The experiences of Theatre Workshop and Corporate are not unique, Auckland's independent theatres seem cursed to eventually close, a curse even the last great monolith could not escape.

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<sup>25</sup> Record of a meeting held Friday 8th March 1986 between representatives of QEII Arts Council, Theatre corporate and Mercury Theatre.

<sup>26</sup> Letter sent from Theatre Corporate Director Roger McGill to MP K. Burke. NZMS 886 Archive Box 12 Series 14. Miscellaneous documents dated 1986.

<sup>27</sup> Correspondence between Roger McGill and Ann Hercus (Minister of Social welfare) 19th May, 1986. NZMS 886 Archive Box 12 Series 14. Miscellaneous documents dated 1986.

<sup>28</sup> Record of a meeting held Friday 8th March 1986 between representatives of QEII Arts Council, Theatre corporate and Mercury Theatre. NZMS 886 Archive Box 12 Series 14.

<sup>29</sup> Miscellaneous letters from toured schools. NZMS 886 Archive Box 3 Series 39. School Programmes – Programmes.

<sup>30</sup> Correspondence between director Roger McGill and R.C. Mullins, assistant secretary of Auckland Regional authority. Feb 28th 1986. NZMS 886 Archive Box 12 Series 14. Auckland Regional Authority correspondence.

When the competition has perished, when an effective monopoly has been established, what would it take to close an apex theatre? What would it take to kill the Pop-up Globe?

## Pop-up Globe

What is there to say about the Pop-up Globe that has not already been said? Most could see the writing on the wall that Summer Shakespeare and Theatre Corporate would eventually meet their demise for one reason or another, but nobody could have foreseen a global pandemic in 2020. After an explosive 2016 arrival that established as the premiere Shakespeare performance in Auckland, the Pop-up Globe continued to thrive, booking schools while maintaining appeal to the wider public. In just four years the Globe had produced sixteen productions and sold out 750,000 tickets,<sup>31</sup> which makes the arrival of COVID-19 all the more tragic. Auckland's theatre culture had been steadily declining

The Latin phrase *deus ex machina* describes the moment in a story when a seemingly unsurmountable problem is resolved by unlikely circumstances. Literally translating to *god from the machine*, the expression's roots lie in Greek theatre wherein characters representing gods would be lowered onto stage in moments where divine intervention was the only appropriate solution. Hence, the description of COVID-19 as a *diabolus ex machina* seems rather appropriate to describe the Pop-up Globes' unceremonious fall from grace. Just as quickly as the Globe arrived, it slunk back into that good night. By 2021 the company had entered liquidation as creditors came prowling and despite being taken for all they had, creditors were left unsatiated by the Globe's remains. Co-founder Tobias Grant would walk away from the venture only retaining his right to trade under the Pop-up Globe in the future. In September 2023, the Pop-up Globe was welcomed back into the arms of the public, announcing its revival. Immediately quelling any discourse, the Globe expressed their intention to pay back the outstanding balance owed to creditors despite being under no legal obligation to do so.<sup>32</sup> Operations resumed shortly thereafter, and for once the story of an independent theatre narrowly avoided ending in tragedy, standing triumphant as the last great bastion of theatre in Tāmaki Makaurau.

A common thread for theatres in Tāmaki Makaurau is the fight to put on one more show in the face of overwhelming odds. Theatre Workshop produced Summer Shakespeare festivals at losses until its eventual indefinite hiatus. Theatre Corporate

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<sup>31</sup> Anne Gibson, "From 750,000 ticket sales to \$1m liabilities: The demise of Auckland's Pop-up Globe," *The New Zealand Herald*, March 18, 2021. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/from-750000-ticket-sales-to-1m-liabilities-the-demise-of-aucklands-pop-up-globe/HZAACBEURMTQVSA4ZQKH3ZG5PI/>

<sup>32</sup> Anne Gibson, "Shakespearean Pop-Up Globe: To be again - to repay creditors," *The New Zealand Herald*, October 3, 2023. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/shakespearean-pop-up-globe-to-be-again-to-repay-creditors/EAAP2BYXIJBU5LIU6DU2EZGIYU/>



was unable to compensate its cast and crew, and yet the show would go on until they could no longer afford the overhead for their rehearsal space. The Pop-up Globe was more concerned with the damage that a failure to pay back their debts would do to their brand more so than their budget. When Raymond Hawthorne founded Theatre Corporate in 1974 he wrote in the rules and regulations that the space he created would be one for “Expressing creative talents, free from commercial pressure.”<sup>33</sup> Hawthorne would fulfil this promise to Theatre Corporate, occasionally to the detriment of its employees, but his sentiment would be echoed by Theatre Workshop in 1996 by committing to surpassing their 1995 success no matter the cost, and by the Pop-up Globe in 2023 to return to the Tāmaki Makaurau, again, no matter the cost. Hungarian playwright Lajos Egri mused that “We all want to be remembered: We want to do things that will make people say, ‘Isn’t he wonderful?’” That is the answer to why even when the seats are empty and the theatre is dark, these troupes struggled on. For what other reason would Theatre Corporate treasure away all those letters, would Theatre Workshop tuck away every newspaper review, would Sydney Musgrove repeatedly give up his summers, would Michael Robinson take a pay cut in the heights of his success. The longevity of amateur theatre in Tāmaki Makaurau is poor because concern has rarely ever been about the long-term profitability of their arrangements, but rather with the legacy they leave.

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<sup>33</sup> History of Theatre Corporate p1. NZMS 886 Archive Box 2 Series 14. Auckland Council Libraries Heritage Collections. Auckland.

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