



27 April 2025

Tēnā koutou kātoa,

Ōtepoti is an international UNESCO City of Literature, and a city whose arts scene has been acclaimed nationally and internationally. Yet, the city no longer has a professional theatre space or meaningful infrastructure, which is a disgrace. We would like to begin by stating that we are deeply disappointed by the DCC's total elimination, without consultation, of the budgeted theatre infrastructure, \$17.1 million.

Further to this dire situation, many professional theatre creatives are leaving Ōtepoti because of the lack of a proper professional theatre. As of [2023](#), the DCC claimed that it "aims to position Dunedin as one of the world's great small cities for arts and culture, where creativity is fully integrated into the city's identity and recognised as essential to our future success." This has proved to be a mockery.

As the DCC's own [Ara Toi states](#), "Arts and culture have been an important part of Dunedin since its founding. Creativity is now recognised internationally as essential for a successful modern city, and key to Dunedin's future." Indeed, a 2024 [Massey University report](#) indicates that for "every dollar spent on live performance[,] \$3.20 is returned in benefits to the wider community."

Professional theatre collective Wow! Productions Trust has produced work since 1996, and during that time we have seen many changes to the professional theatre landscape and ecosystem in Ōtepoti. The existing ecosystem in Ōtepoti includes career practitioners, emerging artists, community groups, and significant educational institutions, including the University of Otago. However, the current situation is by far the most concerning in the nearly three decades of our operation.

In a nutshell, Wow! Productions, as a resident part of this ecosystem, feels it has been completely abandoned by the DCC, thus cutting off a substantial amount of its lifeblood. We have been cast adrift, with no apparent hope of rescue. This is demoralising, dispiriting, and not conducive to the production of creative, innovative work - a vital aspect of this UNESCO city's

status. The DCC has repeatedly requested the local theatre community to offer solutions to the ongoing absence of a professional performing arts space but has ignored the wealth of creative suggestions provided, including those from Wow! Productions.

Since the abrupt, unexpected, and unwarranted closure of the Fortune Theatre in 2018, the theatre profession in Ōtepoti has been in increasingly dire straits, notably because the closure of the Fortune meant a significant lack of core infrastructure for the city's career theatre professionals. Unlike visual artists and writers, theatre creatives cannot work alone and in isolation – they need creative collaborators and a professionally run site for performance.

A healthy professional theatre infrastructure and space provides a focus for professional artists and a nexus around which other projects and groups (such as Wow!) can revolve. The Fortune's closure has meant that many professional theatre creatives have left the city or have been obliged to find other employment because of the dearth of professional opportunities in Ōtepoti; previously such a professional infrastructure was provided primarily by the Fortune Theatre. The Fortune, in partnership with the University of Otago Theatre Studies Programme, provided a crucial link, via apprenticeships, for students to develop necessary professional skills as actors, directors, playwrights, stage managers, designers, educators, and technicians.

In the past 5 years, we've seen a massive decline in national and international touring productions coming to Ōtepoti, primarily due to the paucity of suitable venues. Without touring shows, local creatives have significantly fewer opportunities for upskilling, networking, and connection, which affects local artists and disconnects Ōtepoti from other theatre-makers in Aotearoa. A venue offers a hub for local artists to collaborate and cross-pollinate, creating new and unexpected opportunities for creativity. But it is audiences in Otago and Southland suffering the most. These audiences now lack opportunities to see diverse, high-quality work. For example, local rangatahi must take trips to the Court Theatre in Christchurch at significant expense and logistical challenges to satisfy their NCEA requirements to see professional theatre.

It is essential for the local community not to just experience stories but local stories, brought to life by talented professional creatives. Wow! has a proud history of commissioning local stories for theatre (such as *Farley's Arcade* and *Lines of Fire*) but cannot produce them without the artists to bring them to life. To that end, a purpose-built multi-use performing arts venue is not just for professional practitioners but a hub to engage the community, whether through performances, workshops, educational programmes, or informal meetings to develop a wider cultural exchange. Stories told through live theatre are ways to explore identity, expression, and connection, opening up conversation in a polarised society to foster empathy, cultivate belonging, and explore imagined futures. As performance theorist Jill Dolan writes, theatre audiences can “share [an] experience of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. University of Michigan Press, 2005, p.2.

In 2018, as a response to the closure of the Fortune, the DCC commissioned a substantial study and reports from Charcoal Blue<sup>2</sup> into “future options for a venue for the performing arts in the City” (Charcoal Blue Third Report, p. 3). Charcoal Blue’s final report was delivered in 2021, and a core finding was the need to provide “a creative, flexible space for all, that will answer the needs of the artistic community now and inspire the next generation” (p. 17). The report also recommended that DCC should take a significant role in the creation of a professional performing arts facility, stating that “the management and operation of a Council owned and supported facility of this kind should not be considered in isolation of Council’s other similar and/or related assets, or any future strategy to establish a broader cultural facilities entity” (p. 14). This report was ignored by the DCC, despite the significant time and expenditures taken to create it – a profound and disappointing waste of money and effort.

Stage South, for example, as a representative voice for the theatre community, has striven to build such a relationship, and has worked hard to provide options, which to date have been ignored or dismissed by the DCC’s actions. Such a relationship needs to involve professional theatre creatives as equal collaborators with councillors and senior council staff at all levels. Although creative practitioners – such as Wow!, Stage South, Theatreworks, and afterburner – are currently seeking to take leadership roles in this space, the DCC needs to provide collaborative leadership in conjunction with – and advised by – the city’s notable theatre professionals. The DCC should commission a theatre action plan, overseen by these theatre professionals, similar to the recently adopted music plan.

As has been pointed out many times, outside of educational contexts<sup>3</sup>, Ōtepoti has not had a public purpose-built theatre in over 100 years. His Majesty’s Theatre, now Sammy’s, on Crawford Street was opened in 1903. Now, the funding – which had previously been earmarked for a performing arts hub in the city’s 9-year plan, and subsequently removed without consultation – must be reinstated, and a collaborative and equitable relationship between the city’s theatre professionals and the DCC needs to be formulated. The DCC must fulfill its promises; do not abandon the arts community again.

Further, there is not a single public theatre space in Dunedin which is currently fully fit for purpose, in particular with regard to suitable access to these premises, such as the Mayfair Theatre, which literally cannot be entered by anyone who requires mobility access. Moreover, international best practice now favours flexible black box theatre spaces, rather than old-fashioned fixed proscenium arch configurations, such as the Mayfair.

The Professional Theatre Fund, administered by the DCC, has been a means whereby one-off professional theatre projects have been funded, and thus it is an important element in Ōtepoti’s theatrical ecosystem. This fund needs to remain and be inflation-adjusted (from its current \$90,000 annual limit set in 2021). However, the fund should not take the place of a professional theatre infrastructure and proper space and site for professional theatre in the city. As it stands,

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<sup>2</sup> The Charcoal Blue study cost \$343,000, \$120,000 of which came from Creative New Zealand and the balance being paid by the council.” (“Sammy’s Dropped Due to Cost”, *ODT*, 22 May 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The issue with any theatre space built within an education context is that any users are obliged to work around that institution’s classes, assessments and so forth, which is therefore unsuitable for professional theatre work.

the Dunedin theatre community is on the brink of irreparable damage, with artists leaving the city and audiences losing opportunities to hear our uniquely southern stories.

The DCC must take immediate and decisive action.

Nāku noa, nā,

Cindy Diver (Chair)

Donna Cameron

Kimberley Fridd

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(Wow! Productions Trust Board)