

## DRAFT FEATURE, PLAYMARKET ANNUAL (2025)

By Kim Morgan

### Ōtepoti Dunedin's theatrical roots run deep.

Whare tapere traditions stretch back hundreds of years across our varied landscapes. Settlers began converting existing spaces (e.g., a horse bazaar and a hotel) into European style theatres by 1862, catering to a booming populace's desire for diversion during the Otago Gold Rush.

Yet for all the refurbished cinemas (e.g., Regent, Mayfair, Sammy's) that populated 20c theatre in Dunedin, no company stood as proudly as Fortune Theatre. For more than 44 years it boasted the world's southernmost professional theatre — and the city's sole year-round professional company. It's abrupt closure on 1 May 2018, due to extreme financial constraints, sent shockwaves across the motu.

If we believe the urban legend that all cells regenerate every seven years, it would seem an auspicious time to survey the local landscape. And so my audacious brief has been to interrogate the challenges of keeping professional theatre alive in Ōtepoti Dunedin without the nexus of a resident company or a fit-for-purpose performance venue, and in light of ever-increasing demands on dwindling resources for southern climes.

But first, a caveat. "Professional" is now a dubious moniker in a city with a shrinking critical mass of artists: we have no local bellwether such as a Court, Centrepiece, Circa, or ATC as an aspirational model; many practitioners contend there has been a "dumbing down" of audiences' expectations for professional work in recent years; some argue against "siloing" Pro vs Am, when none of us are properly paid for all our work; while others celebrate exciting new work that originates in the fruitful area between community endeavours and seasoned practitioners. To that end, I rely on both local funding metrics and extensive input from my peers to guide me; and I must consider that such distinctions may no longer apply to nor serve our stalwart artists as we fumble toward new models of creation.

Much of what follows is grim, and feels akin to staggering onward in a Beckettian landscape — awaiting a salvation or release that will never come. And yet for all our existential dread, we continue to punch above our weight in developing and delivering theatrical works that stand toe-to-toe with others across the motu. "I can't go on like this. That's what you think."

### **"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"**

Seven years later, Ōtepoti Dunedin is still without a year-round professional company or a fit-for-purpose mid-size venue, prompting many practitioners to lament our city being "stuck" in an ouroboros of ennui. Yet for all the seeming stagnation — and endless consultations — there has actually been a shocking amount of churn amongst our ranks.

Veteran actor Julie Edwards, who performed 70+ shows at Fortune and derived 70% of her income locally, shifted her family to Te Ika a Māui to continue working full-time. Lara Macgregor, Fortune's Artistic Director from 2010-15, still considers Dunedin home — but has been freelancing in all other majors centres for a decade. Funding options mean "maybe producing one show a year in Dunedin, if you're lucky." Producer H-J Kilkelly cites "lack of infrastructure, unsustainable funding models, and declining standards" as the

impetus for working primarily out of Wellington, despite moving here with family years ago. And the vast majority of our University or Polytechnic-trained artists leave town within 2-3 years of graduation, citing the inability to work full-time or to apprentice regularly with senior practitioners.

Dunedin's remaining theatre artists are tied to this place for non-vocational reasons: family, home, and lifestyle. A significant proportion now make theatre as a second job or by avocation, otherwise occupied by teaching / admin / freelance work to pay the bills. Those working FT as artists are allied to larger entities (Uni, Fringe, Playmarket), and/or creating their own series of projects in a never-ending "gig economy." Most of us have become masters of the hyphenate, cobbling together any number of disparate titles just to survive. And our lives have become a Sisyphean cycle of unrelenting grant applications and contingency planning.

It seems few practitioners have wholly abandoned their arts practice: they pop up sporadically in single offerings, while even our retirees appear periodically in the mix. But rather than commending us for being "hearty southerners," we could be consoled for choosing this place as home and struggling to make art as best we can in that matrix.

A review of Dunedin City Council's "Professional Theatre Fund" (PTF) reveals that 66 grants were awarded to 30 different entities (artists or projects) between September 2018 and September 2024. Yet roughly half of those recipients have since shuttered, moved north, or gone dormant with no work announced this year: Arcade (young actors); dollhouse (emerging artists); RBS Productions (collaborative); Unity Creative (physical / development); Talking House (verbatim / community); Moose of Fire (theatre / events); Happy You (forum); Ake Ake (physical / street); Toolbox (schools); etc. Another quarter were for single productions of new works, including several entries in our annual Fringe and biannual Arts Festivals — the former catering to more "edgy" fare, while the latter is perceived as more "prestigious."

Of these losses, none has been more acute than that of Prospect Park Productions (2015-2024), a fruitful partnership between producer H-J Kilkelly and award-winning playwright Emily Duncan. In addition to developing and producing numerous plays and podcasts, Prospect Park also encompassed Ōtepoti Theatre Lab (ŌTL, 2019-2023). ŌTL was born of Duncan's desire to preserve and adapt Fortune Theatre's Studio 4x4 Young Playwright's Initiative (imported from The Court by Macgregor in 2012, and facilitated by Duncan in 2017-18). ŌTL's Playwrights Programme provided "more targeted development support," with individualised dramaturgical mentoring and guidance, promoting the playwright's agency and proactive accessibility policies.

In addition to its site specific and school workshop Public Programmes, ŌTL developed 15 *original scripts by local artists*. The Playwrights Programme included professional workshopping and staged public readings, career networking, and foundational support for further development. More than a third of these stories centred tāngata whenua and immigrant voices. Many works had further productions, notably *The World's First Lovers* (PPP, Kia Mau Festival 2023), *Wahine Mātātoa* (Theatreworks, Dunedin Arts Festival 2025), and *Patty with a WhY* (Auckland Fringe, 2024). Several playwrights also went on to further study of the craft at tertiary institutions including the IIML. Prospect Park's decision to shutter last year, citing unsustainable funding cycles, sounded yet another alarm bell among our practitioners.

Yet the past seven years have also seen perseverance, plus an injection of new artistic energies. Wow! Productions, a professional co-op formed in 1996, continues to auspice and support other entities — even if they are no longer able to produce 2-3 shows per year of their own. Afterburner (a collective from 2001 of NZ designers, artists and performers) continues to create and tour striking atmospheric works, with current plans to establish a trust to secure longer term funding. Recent PTF recipients also include newer entities such as Dunedin Summer Shakespeare (DSS), Late Bloomers (improv / solo pieces), Axiom (emerging artists), SBZ Productions (multi-disciplinary), Birds of a Feather, and my own Hic Sunt Dracones (HSD).

With few exceptions, these endeavours are *small cast shows with a handful of creatives on professional contracts, often hamstrung by the technical quirks of their respective venues*. Companies like Macgregor's Birds of a Feather, along with my own DSS and HSD, can only pledge to mount *one show per year* — and in my case, that's predicated on using non-traditional venues (parks, museums, empty retail spaces). And in many cases, professional artists agree to "payment in kind" to reduce industry standard fees, without which the budgets would simply collapse. All of which makes for an unsustainable environment for truly professional theatre.

### **"Nothing is more real than nothing"**

The expected flux of a post-pandemic arts landscape notwithstanding, our suspended animation can be squarely attributed to *a lack of investment from local, regional and national funders — in both our people and our infrastructure*.

By one metric, DCC maintained a base-level of support for local artists / projects since Fortune's closure: \$1.65m (36%) of all contestable grants was allocated to various theatre projects and venues since mid-2018 — just over half of that via the Professional Theatre Fund. [N.B. these figures do not include rates relief, heritage funding, feasibility studies, etc.] DCC ring-fenced \$95,000/yr for PTF monies from their City Service / City Project Fund, at a similar level to their Fortune contributions; and for two years, this pot was augmented by \$100,000/yr from CNZ. Yet that support was far short of the \$360,000 per annum Kahikatea Funding Agreement between CNZ and Fortune (2016-18).

By mid-2020, CNZ ceased their contributions to our PTF. Seven years on, DCC's \$95k annual allocation remains the same — as does its critical \$20k cap to "support one project or project phase per application." Meaning not even five artists or projects can receive the full \$20k each year, which in itself is a third or less of even the most modest budgets. Some applicants have been cautioned to reflect dwindling audience numbers / box office receipts in their 50% (max) capacity projections. So without additional substantive support, *PTF funding alone will never sustain professional theatre in Dunedin*.

Dunedin Fringe Festival and Dunedin Arts Festival have also suffered substantial budget cuts in recent years, which trickle down in decreased artist / project subsidies. Regional sponsors such as Ngāi Tahu Fund and Otago Community Trust have provided added support for some practitioners (up to \$5k and \$10k, respectively). The former requires significant involvement of tāngata whenua; while the latter excludes capital expenses or wages, meaning monies go toward transitory production costs (rentals) rather than personnel or durable goods. Regionally, only the PTF can functionally cover artists' fees on a pro-rated annual or project-basis — and that \$20k simply doesn't go very far.

Which brings us to the CNZ juggernaut. For years, southern practitioners have lamented being the “poor cousin” to northern regions — a fact borne out by statistics provided to Playmarket via an Official Information Act request. A cursory survey of Table 1 shows how far behind Te Wai Pounamu lags in its success rates since 2018: Auckland averages 46% of grants (for their 33% of population); Wellington 27% (10% pop.); Canterbury <7% (13% pop.); Otago just over 2% (5% pop.); and Southland sits on a dismal 0% (2% pop.). Excluding investment programmes, Creative Communities, and Dunedin Fringe or Arts Festival support, these figures are based upon *applicant location*, not where the activity took place; yet figures are similarly skewed by *activity region*, with Auckland and Wellington still hoarding 60% of grants, while Dunedin sits on just over 3% since 2019 (once we discount a 2018 spike from out-of-region offerings following Fortune’s closure).

CNZ “provide[d] dedicated support for the theatre sector in Ōtepoti Dunedin from 2018 to 2020,” partnering with Council by granting \$643k to consultations, projects, and access to NZ theatre work. The majority of this money went to a feasibility study and early PTF funds, while other “complementary, targeted initiatives” included Tour-Makers/PANNZ, Dunedin Fringe, and Wow! Productions. CNZ also cites contestable funding (Arts Grants) for practitioners, such as PPP’s inaugural season of ŌTL.

When asked about specific mechanisms or subsidies to support our struggling artists and failing infrastructure, CNZ referred us to their resources (Sustainable Careers, Development Funds) and noted upcoming systemic shifts to better support artists and community needs. *But since mid-2020 when “the [post-Fortune] programme was completed”, they provide no evidence of earmarked funding for our region, nor any action plan beyond submissions to Council’s annual or long term plans — and these seem clearly focused on infrastructure and venues, not practitioners or projects.*

Noting many artists and organisations are based in Auckland or Wellington, CNZ states “assessment panels consider geographic spread when making funding recommendations.” Rosella Hart (a local actor / producer contracted to write CNZ proposals) counters: “there’s no discernible strategy to grow and support the south island specifically, and a lack of targeted funding. The recent elimination of feedback makes it impossible to learn from failures or get insight. There’s no obvious metric for comparison across geographical areas, assessing how a project may contribute to local arts viability where there are specific challenges.” Kilkelly argues this regional disadvantage is compounded by CNZ’s “expectation of a track record” — as it’s virtually impossible in a city that “lacks critical arts infrastructure” to create work on par with productions elsewhere.

Our efforts to carry on despite this dearth of funding have resulted in unsustainable alternatives. Unsuccessful in securing \$40k from CNZ to pay creatives for *Prima Facie*, Macgregor was forced to “beg, borrow and steal” those funds, including multiple private benefactors and a Give-A-Little campaign (which we also used to help launch DSS when CNZ declined our applications). But self-funding of projects is unrealistic in the long term, and benefactors are unlikely to contribute on a regular basis.

Worse yet is the “in-kind” pickle of donated fees and professional services. While Dunedin is not unique in this regard, we have become an extreme exemplar, as our artists seem increasingly willing to accept bare minimum fees (vs industry standards). Our PTF requires a 30% contribution toward project costs; and when dwindling box office cannot cover that amount, donation of fees becomes the default. Capability Funding via DCC / OCT pays for other artists and consultants, but expressly not the applicant — meaning additional support is needed, or we simply donate our time. CNZ stipulates a minimum hourly wage,

but also includes in-kind support as income on budgets; and they regularly approve applications where artists rebate fees to enable projects with limited funds.

This de-valuing of our worth is further amplified within our local industry. Desperate to create work despite inadequate funding, we often agree to underpay ourselves and then offer sub-par fees to our colleagues, lest projects be cancelled en toto. Further, not all artistic practices are treated equally: Duncan makes a compelling case that playwrights are perennially underpaid; while certain designers (LX, SFX) may be expected to run their own shows after being offered a fraction of their peer's fees (Sets, Costumes). Without additional funding or consistent receipts, our budgetary default is now to in-kind valuable services. Council staff press in reports for ongoing operational rather than project funding — but also recognise in-kind donations are de rigueur under current grant structures. And while staff officially advise against the tactic, sub-committees' and assessors' approval of this practice feels tantamount to incentivising reduced rates to make budgets viable. Without further investment in people and spaces, our collective hands are tied.

We strongly echo Kerry Palmer's recent assessment of Theatre for Young People: "All of these companies are hindered operationally by the inability to plan long-term. They are caught in a cycle of applying for short-term project funding every few months. They rely on box office for survival, income which is impacted by low average ticket prices. There is no direct pathway to increased support either — CNZ have set a very high, and often unobtainable, threshold to become an investment client." And we simply cannot keep begging for donations or grossly underpaying ourselves show-by-show, while we attempt to produce high-calibre results to justify future funding. It's become a cycle of utter madness, and at some point we will break under the strain.

**"Better hope deferred than none. Up to a point. Till the heart starts to sicken."**

This lack of investment in our people is compounded by the prolonged lack of investment in suitable spaces for our work. Without a fit-for-purpose venue with the requisite support facilities and personnel, it is virtually impossible for us to consistently create quality work. Disadvantaged at every turn, we are forced to "reinvent the wheel" every time we set up in a variety of ill-equipped, ill-maintained, or inaccessible spaces.

In the wake of Fortune's demise, DCC and CNZ jointly funded a \$342,000 feasibility study from Charcoalblue (2018-2021). Their functional brief — for a flexible, mid-sized auditorium (approx. 350 seats) with additional studios, workshops, office space, and a community hub of smaller spaces — ranked potential sites on various criteria. DCC then determined "the scale of the proposal and its indicative costings were not viable," as top options were excluded for various reasons, including prohibitive capital costs. A single site approach was abandoned in favour of deferring ancillary spaces while developing scaled-back "core facilities" (auditorium and front/back of house) by 2028. DCC moved to include \$17.1m in capital budgets and \$4.5m in operating budgets in their Draft 10 Year Plan (2021-31). Two lower-ranked, existing sites — the Athenaeum (Octagon) and Mayfair (South Dunedin) — were then presented for community feedback in May 2021.

Mixed public opinion, coupled with practitioners' concerns over preliminary plans for either site, prompted DCC to seek "further engagement with the performing arts community" while retaining the \$17.1m in successive Annual Plans. As round tables were proposed and workshops dragged on, the Dunedin Theatre Network (DTN) proposed a "staged refurbishment" of ageing facilities at the Playhouse Theatre, the Athenaeum Building, and the Mayfair Theatre (the former being dedicated to youth programmes, while all three host local events and serve as road houses). Stage South — a charitable trust formed to

salvage Fortune's wardrobe, with expanded aims "to foster and promote the sustainability of professional theatre in Otago and Southland" — likewise commissioned indicative plans for an Ōtepoti Performing Arts Centre (ŌPAC), which *aspired to be the first purpose-built venue in Dunedin in over a century*.

After Council advocated for a unified proposal, a "statement of intent" with a request for cornerstone funding was submitted in January 2025 for the Playhouse, Athenaeum, and ŌPAC. A week later, news broke that Council's Draft Nine Year Plan — which had been in the works for months — no longer included \$17.1m for a performing arts venue in its capital budget. Further, they noted the request for cornerstone funding would be "rates funded as it is an operating expenses," and that the previous \$17.1m of budgeted capex would be inaccessible to these groups "unless there were different ownership models in place" (Executive Summary, 28/1/25).

Disheartening as this news is, it is hardly unexpected after seven years of consultation, re-engagement, and stasis. And to be fair, it's bloody difficult to lobby in good faith for increased public debt or higher rates at a time when residents are already up in arms over successive double-digit increases to address Dunedin's ageing infrastructure. Council notes that future capex *could* still be directed to a performing arts venue, and they *can* instruct staff to continue exploring "ownership models that may not impact rates to the extent the current proposals do." But nothing is certain, indeed.

### **"Habit is a great deadener"**

Dunedin's artists remain grossly underfunded, yet we are expected to make professional quality theatre. Our current venues are aged and either too small, poorly-adapted, ill-equipped, inaccessible, or prohibitively expensive to rent — hamstringing both local productions and touring ones to which we might aspire. And we grow weary of going "off the map" by necessity, constantly adapting non-theatrical spaces to suit our needs.

Designer Martyn Roberts opines: "getting artists to go to spaces they may not identify as a 'theatre' can be hard work. Fortune at least had an identity and location that was easy for audiences to connect with." But more to the point, he contends "the wrong question was asked" over the past seven years, as briefs and consults focused on "future options for a venue" rather than "what is needed to sustain professional theatre in Dunedin."

How will we simply survive, let alone move the sector forward? To that profound query, my colleagues offer the following directives:

- \* Increased investment from our local Council, both for practitioners and infrastructure
- \* Greater visibility for our works from Council and Enterprise Dunedin (which prioritises local films and events), by both promoting and attending our works
- \* Increased support from CNZ, both for individual practitioners / projects and as targeted investment funding to build arts practice within our region
- \* Clear guides on arts governance so that local bodies can better understand our needs
- \* Greater collaboration with tāngata whenua, including spaces that recognise Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their architectural and spatial relationships

- \* Sustainable support mechanisms for the creation and production of original, local stories
- \* Retention mechanisms (targeted funding and/or apprenticeships) to keep recent graduates — as well as emerging artists beyond that limited ecosystem — living, training, and creating art in our city
- \* A fit-for-purpose performing arts venue, with requisite support spaces and staff

The matter of a venue is strategically placed last on this list; for urgent as that need is, the preceding needs must be met before any impactful use of that space can occur. *People must be supported before places can be utilised.* And we unanimously agree that *any future venue cannot be the private domain of a single entity.* Much as we miss the people and productions of Fortune Theatre (if not the rising damp and constrained spaces), the days of a monopoly by a resident professional theatre are well and truly behind us. The local ecosystem has fundamentally changed, and the artists of tomorrow require new models and shared spaces if we are to create truly professional theatre once more.

All of these directives will require a substantial amount of investment from multiple official entities, and likely private enterprise beyond that. All of which looks increasingly unlikely in the current socio-economic climate, where art is dubbed a “nice to have” and belts are increasingly tightened. And yet we soldier on in Ōtepoti Dunedin, managing to produce significant work despite our systemic scarcity. **We can’t go on. We’ll go on.**

*Special Thanks (Contributors): Emily Duncan; H-J Kil Kelly; Lara Macgregor; Martyn Roberts; Cindy Diver; Rosella Hart; Lisa Warrington; Allison Horsley; Karen Elliot; Sahara Pohatu-Trow; Julie Edwards; Gregory Cooper; Matthew Morgan; DCC Staff; CNZ Staff*