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2 Cobden Street

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17/4/25

Kia ora members of Dunedin City Council ,

RE: The Case for a purpose built 21st Century dedicated Theatre space— An Educational, Cultural and Inclusive community Imperative

We write to you as educators and advocates of the arts, to passionately support the re-establishment of a local theatre—one that not only enriches our cultural landscape but stands as a cornerstone for the educational excellence our city prides itself in, a stage for world class performing arts experiences to, and a shelter that promotes community cohesion through local taonga/treasure, tangata/people and all they can realise with cutting edge technologies bringing more than you could ever imagine or dream of to life.

Theatre is not a luxury; it is a living classroom. The creative process involved in theatre-making—Developing Ideas, Communicating and Interpreting, Understanding the Arts in Context, and Practical Knowledge—does not occur in a vacuum, nor by accident. These are deliberately learned, fostered and refined skills that extend well beyond the stage. Students who participate in theatre develop a multitude of competencies: collaboration, critical thinking, empathy, and confidence. These qualities are transferable to every facet of society—from doctors who must understand and connect with patients, to lawyers who must argue with insight and integrity, to citizens who can relate and contribute meaningfully to a diverse world.

In Aotearoa, initiatives such as Stars on Stage (Stage Rage), Show Quest (formerly Stage Challenge), SGCNZ Shakespeare's Globe Centre, and ŌSIC (Otago Secondary Improvisation Club) have (and still do) showcase the transformative power of theatre for our rangatahi. These platforms offer more than performance—they are powerful vehicles for storytelling, a cornerstone of Māori culture and a means for exploring identity, whakapapa, and history. Through performance, rangatahi find voice, purpose, and belonging.

Theatre also fosters manaakitanga, building inclusive, respectful, and affirming communities. A theatre that serves all—from grassroots creatives to professional and international collaborators—must be accessible and welcoming, a place where neurodiversity, differently abled, culturally different, and gender diverse are not just accommodated but celebrated.

Importantly, a dedicated theatre space serves the whole community. It becomes a hub for intergenerational connection, mental health support, creative expression, spiritual exploration, and social cohesion. It gives us both mirrors—to reflect ourselves—and windows—to view the lives and experiences of others. In an increasingly digitised and polarised society, theatre encourages dialogue, facilitates understanding, and teaches what increasingly appears to be the lost art of constructive disagreement.

The arts are often perceived as a “nice to have.” But I urge you to consider this: in times of crisis and calm alike, it is our cultural spaces that hold us together, nurture our well-being, and build resilient, informed, and connected citizens. The arts are not an optional extra. They are a cultural necessity, a catalyst for education, and a foundation for a flourishing society. The creation or support of a dedicated theatre is not merely a building project. It is an investment in our future as a city known for its creative Arts community—a generational gift to the people of this region.

Thank you for your consideration of a topic we consider to be vital, from witnessing first hand, the transformative power of Theatre in the classroom and society alike.

Ngā mihi nui,  
Rachel McMillan

Whakaari Aotearoa Drama New Zealand, Otago/Southland Representative, Performing Arts  
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