

FORTUNE THEATRE: DUNEDIN VENUES BRINGS BACK PROFESSIONAL THEATRE TO THE CITY

Intention

1. To reopen Fortune Theatre as a professional theatre space in the heart of Dunedin City, managed by Dunedin Venues along side its other locations Forsyth Barr Stadium and the Dunedin Centre.
2. To turn around \$122,000 Dunedin City Council annual expenditure on the empty building to a more than \$200,000 profit.

Background

1. Fortune Theatre closed suddenly in May 2018 with the theatre trust citing “financial viability”.
2. In a Stuff article (May 2018) Christchurch's Court Theatre artistic director, Ross Gumbley, said the Fortune had been struggling with falling audience numbers. “It has been disappointing to see audiences at The Fortune decline in recent years. Doubly so because during the same period The Court has seen record attendances enabling stability and future growth.” Court Theatre was operating from a purpose-built space inside a former grain shed in Addington after the 2011 earthquake had damaged its Arts Centre building.
3. At the time of closure Fortune Theatre ran about six plays for limited seasons. The theatre employed eight full-time and three part-time staff. It received government funding via Creative New Zealand of \$500,000/year as well as funding from the DCC and Otago Community Trust.
4. Little repairs and maintenance had been done on the building which was experiencing damp issues due to a leak in the roof (now repaired). Audience seating was old with little leg room. Toilets were down a hard to access, narrow, steep stairwell.

5. Built in 1869 by pre-eminent architect Robert Lawson (also known for Dunedin's First Church, Larnach Castle, Otago Boys' High School) in the gothic revival style, it was originally the Wesleyan Trinity Church.
6. The Fortune Theatre Trust bought the property from the church in 1978 and until 2000 maintained the building and operated it as Dunedin's only professional theatre. The Council purchased the theatre in 2000 for \$220,000 after the Trust experienced financial difficulties, with the Trust then leasing it from the Council until its closure in 2018. The property has been unused since.
7. Upon the theatre closure, Council commissioned Origin Consultants for a building report (September 2021) and, following recommendations, carried out urgent repairs including repairing leaks in the roof, removing carpet and rotten wood. Dehumidifiers operated by remote sensors, keep the building from deteriorating. As the dehumidifiers drain into the existing plumbing, there is no record of how much water is being removed from the building.
8. The property has Heritage Category 1 status under Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014 which covers those with special or outstanding historical or cultural heritage significance or value.
9. The land is zoned Central Business District and is within the Moray Place/Dowling Street Commercial Heritage Precinct. The zoning allows for a wide range of activities including licensed premises.
10. A structural assessment in 2011 determined the building is 67% of the New Build Standard. DCC Earthquake-prone Building Compliance Officer Peter Brookland has advised Fortune Theatre will not require an updated seismic assessment (email 15/1/25) under the Building (Earthquake Prone Buildings) Amendment Act 2016.
11. The building currently generates no revenue for council. Annual expenditure is \$122,000 for rates, insurance, depreciation, electricity and maintenance (Council report November 2024).

12. At the Council meeting on 25 November 2024, Councillors voted to seek public feedback on whether to sell the property during its Nine Year Plan consultation.
13. Councillor Lee Vandervis, the only opposing vote, argued if the building was sold there was nothing safeguarding it from demolition. Heritage Category 1 status buildings in the city have been demolished following neglect by property owners (380, 382 and 386 Princes St and 11 Stafford St, as well as the protected heritage facades of 380, 386 and 392 Princes St in 2023/24).
14. The theatre is in a prominent centre-city site with nearby free after-hours (after 6pm) parking. Dunedin people remember it as the place to see professional theatre.
15. The vacuum left by the theatre closure has spawned many groups trying to restart professional theatre in the city. Proposals in front of council currently from the Dunedin Theatre Network are to upgrade the Octagon's Athenaeum (\$15m), the Playhouse in Albany Street (\$5.8m) and South Dunedin's Mayfair (\$13m). The Dunedin Theatre Network received \$100,000 to prepare the report for Council. None of these properties are owned by Council. A feasibility study commissioned by Council and Creative New Zealand, saw \$17.1m put aside in Council's Ten Year Plan for a flexible, mid-sized theatre, which is supported by theatre group Stage South. This has since been removed.

Proposal – the theatre

1. A profitable professional theatre run as part of Dunedin Venues alongside Forsyth Barr Stadium and the Dunedin Centre using their synergies (website, administration) to enable this – budget attached (Appendix A).
2. A theatre which does not rely on arts funding from local or national government (Creative New Zealand), or private business sponsorship.
3. A theatre open at least six-evenings-a-week, February until mid-December (45 weeks), with the opportunity to open for seven, plus during the day.

4. A venue for local professional theatre, touring productions, music, standup comedy and improv.
5. New Zealand's only professional theatre which produces only New Zealand-written plays, with an emphasis on Dunedin plays.
6. Low ticket prices to make sure there are "bums on seats" and the theatre is affordable to as many people as possible.
7. A comfortable theatre which the audience enjoy spending time in.
8. A storyteller of the people of Dunedin (a UNESCO City of Literature) and Otago.
9. Engagement with the University of Otago, Otago Chamber of Commerce, iwi, schools, retirement villages and community groups.

Proposal – the building

1. Required are new toilets, including disability toilets, on the same level as the seating, new cinema-style seating with improved leg room, re-wiring, carpet, replacing rotten boards on stairs and floors, painting and decorating.
2. Fortune has two stage areas – main stage and the downstairs studio. There is no sound proofing between the two areas so they cannot be used concurrently. Due to this, only main stage will be returned to working order.
3. Kurt Webster of Webster Building Ltd has prepared an estimate for the building work (\$209,632.16). Kurt is well known for his heritage work in Dunedin, including Grand Designs NZ episode first aired 7/11/23.
4. Christchurch firm Alloyfold estimate for new cinema-style seating (\$95,752). The proposal is for a capacity of 160 (the number of seats which fit into a container from the manufacturer in China). Measuring the seating area (including the slope) is required to verify seat numbers.

5. DCC Planning has advised as the proposed alterations do not affect the external building envelope there is no need to consult with Heritage New Zealand and the work will not require a resource consent.
6. DCC Building Services (Craig Edmunds) has advised the building consent required for new toilets will include an assessment under Section 112 of the Building Act 2004 for means of escape from fire, and access and facilities for persons with disabilities. A fire alarm system and signage will need to be part of the electrical upgrade. Flat access to the building is already available at both levels via the street. The new seating will accommodate those in wheelchairs.
7. Renovations, plus planning and rehearsal time required to open the theatre is estimated at six months.

Experience

1. Dunedin resident Karen Trebilcock has a unique set of skills to manage the reopening of Fortune Theatre.
2. She has project managed two residential new builds and three restorations/renovations in the past eight years, is a director of two companies (one a building company) and a partner in a farming business.
3. Her first play was performed at the University of Otago's Allen Hall Theatre in 1985 and, under her penname Ella West, recent plays The Middlemarch Singles Ball and Yellow Hut were performed at Dunedin's Globe to sell-out audiences. She is represented by Playmarket.
4. She has been involved in theatre all her life, setting up Theatre New Zealand's One Act Play Festival and drama sections in Performing Arts Competitions where previously there was none.

5. She has also been a board member for the New Zealand Society of Authors, chair of the Government Public Lending Right Advisory Group and an organiser Wild Imaginings: National Children's Writers and Illustrators Hui Dunedin 2019.

23 April 2025

Karen Trebilcock

Dunedin theatre practitioner, playwright (pen name Ella West)

Ph 021 1464 512

ak.trebilcock@xtra.co.nz

Attached:

Appendix A Budget

Photos taken December 2024 by Karen Trebilcock



Figure 1:
Seating area with the former seats removed



Figure 2:
Stage area



Figure 3:
Foyer area (carpet has been removed)



Figure 4:
The former bar area where new toilets will be



Figure 5:
Switch board