

Theatre Archives in New Zealand: The newly branded Theatre Archives New Zealand is reaching out to fringe theatre and the archives community¹

Rowena Cullen

*Emeritus Professor in Information Management
Victoria University of Wellington*

Introduction

The cultural life of a country tells us a great deal about its mores and values, its concerns and aspirations. The cultural activities that flourished in colonial New Zealand and that continue to flourish today provide insights into contemporary New Zealand, and a window into the past, as well as being of absorbing interest in their own right. Cultural history is becoming a noteworthy field of study of increasing interest to academic researchers and social historians, and represents an important area for archivists and managers of special collections in our museums and archives to take on board. That said, outside of the major cultural institutions, and even within them, it is not the easiest area for repositories to focus on. Creativity and record-keeping are not instinctive bed-fellows, and cultural archives are often poorly cared for when they exist, and their value overlooked. This requires a more hands-on approach from those who do recognize the value of archiving cultural activities, and a pro-active interventionist approach.

The history of theatre in New Zealand, which goes back to the 1840s, has not been well recorded, and many precious documents have been irretrievably lost. While some notable performances are advertised and recorded in newspapers of the day, often the more interesting aspects of theatre history, the archives of the companies that come and go, the stories of the flamboyant, creative directors, players, designers that give them life, and the buildings that inspire such affection, are not well recorded. Rather like the travelling players in Hamlet, theatre can often be a precarious, adhoc, hand-to-mouth activity, dependent on the favour of patrons and audiences, characteristics it shares with many of the arts. But the short lives of most theatre companies in New Zealand, and the

ephemeral nature of the theatrical event itself makes it harder to capture this vital element of New Zealand's cultural history than almost any other art form. And when companies collapse, and theatres close, the focus is on current employees rather than records of the past. So it was when Auckland's Mercury Theatre collapsed in 1992, when the liquidators gave a small team of librarians less than twenty-four hours to rescue the Mercury's voluminous records. In such events, the first seeds of the the New Zealand Theatre Archive were sown.

History of Theatre in New Zealand

New Zealand theatre has a history as long as that of European settlement of the country, and dates back to the large number of British immigrants to New Zealand in the late 1830s.² Some of the new settlers may have entertained themselves onboard ship during the long journey to New Zealand, and certainly amateur theatricals will have been part of the culture that many settlers brought with them. According to McLintock³ the first recorded theatrical performance in New Zealand was of *The Lawyer Outwitted*, presented by David C. Osborne on Christmas Eve 1841 in a building called the Albert Theatre which adjoined Watson's Exchange Hotel in Auckland, although it is unlikely that this was in fact the first actual performance. The demand for entertainment in the new colony appears to have been considerable, for McLintock goes on to record that following the first theatrical entertainment in Wellington in 1843, there was a performance of *A Ghost in Spite of Himself* and another crack at lawyers, *The Village Lawyer*, produced by James Henry Marriott and 'a comedy of amateurs'. Marriott went on to open New Zealand's first theatre proper, the Royal Victoria, behind the Ship Hotel, in Manners St, Wellington.⁴ McLintock notes:

... eighteen months later this company of shopkeepers and artisans moved to the Britannia saloon, where, by courtesy of the Oddfellows Lodge, in the four years that followed Marriott and his players presented nearly 300 productions to more than 68,000 people.

Auckland was not to be outdone. Australian theatre pioneer George Buckingham opened a professional production of *The Two Gregories* and *Lovers' Quarrels* on Boxing Night in 1843,⁵ and opened his Royal Victoria Theatre in Auckland the following year. The 1850s and 60s saw many theatres converted, opened and abandoned, and theatre companies come and go, and there are records of theatrical performances as early as 1857 in Christchurch and 1861 in Dunedin. This activity, as McLintock notes,

was for many decades heavily dependent on the vitality of theatre in Australia, actors and touring companies regularly crossing the Tasman, and relocating to parts of New Zealand where audiences were most plentiful (including Otago during the goldrush years). But as Nola Millar notes in her contribution to McLintock's *Encyclopedia*,⁶ amateur actors and actresses, and from the 1840s onwards soldier-actors and garrison theatres kept the theatrical tradition alive in between seasons of so-called 'professional' companies. Amateur theatre continued to thrive from the 1870s through to the late 20th century, from local repertory societies in cities and most towns, to university dramatic societies. Some groups were particularly long-lived, the Dunedin Shakespeare Club surviving from 1887 until the 1960s, and some small independent theatres such as the Careys' New Globe Theatre in Dunedin had professional aspirations. Many a talented actor who learned their trade on the stage of the local 'rep' departed to the UK to fame and fortune.

Between the 1880s and the First World War, Australian entrepreneur J. C. Williamson (himself, along with his wife Maggie, an actor as well as theatre company manager) provided a constant parade of touring productions. Popular artists from Britain as well as Australia were seen in productions ranging from Shakespeare to melodramas, Ibsen to vaudeville, as well as musicals in the 1920s. Although the frequency of productions diminished during the Depression and the Second World War (it was also affected by the rise of the talking movies), the post-WWII period saw several tours of the Old Vic company, (with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh), the Stratford-on-Avon based Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, (now the Royal Shakespeare Company), and other stars such as Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Ralph Richardson, productions which are still remembered today. (Posters signed by the stars that hang in some of our larger theatres are testament to this.)

But more important in the cultural history of New Zealand was the emergence in the 1960s and 70s, following on from many short-lived earlier attempts such as the New Zealand Players (formed by Edith and Richard Campion) and the Southern Comedy Players, of a new group of professional New Zealand companies many of which are still functioning today: Downstage (1964-2013), the Mercury Theatre (1966-1992), the Court Theatre (1970-), the Fortune Theatre (1973-), Centrepoint Theatre (1973-) and Circa Theatre (1976-). While plays by New Zealand playwrights had been performed over the previous century, (most notably the plays of R. A .K. Mason, produced at the Peoples Theatre he co-founded in Auckland in the 1930s),⁷ these new professional theatres

quickly established a culture of performing New Zealand plays along with the classics and contemporary world drama. Although Bruce Mason had been directing and performing his own plays since the 1950s (including the first performance of *The Pohutakawa Tree* for the Champions' New Zealand Players in 1957) and had been performing his one-man show *The End of the Golden Weather* throughout New Zealand since 1959, few other playwrights saw their work on stage. But that changed with the production of Peter Bland's *Father's Day* (starring Pat Evison) in 1966, and since then New Zealand theatre has experienced a 'coming of age' with cultural landmarks such as Roger Hall's *Glide Time* (1976), Greg McGee's *Foreskin's Lament* (1981), Renée's *Wednesday to Come* (1985), Hone Kouka's *Waiora* (1997), and other iconic works that are now part of the New Zealand literary canon.

Today's emerging theatre talent can be found as much in the 'off-Broadway' venues as in the now 'established' professional companies. These groups, companies such as Auckland's Silo Theatre, and The Basement, Wellington's BATS Theatre, Maori theatre company Taki Rua, or any of the more energetic ad hoc theatre groups that spring up in all New Zealand's main cities are often seen as more innovative and risk-taking than the established theatres.⁸ Some have become so successful as almost to be regarded as mainstream, making way for a new wave of 'fringe theatre'. But just as in the early days of New Zealand theatre, their very informality, and the temporary nature of the company performing, takes us back to the same problem – keeping records and archiving productions is the last thing on anyone's mind when there's a 'show' to get on stage, let alone when it's time to break the set and get the next show up. Even where there is a parent company of some permanence overseeing a production this is often the case. Recently a call went out to those involved at the time and to theatre buffs around New Zealand, 'can anyone locate a photograph from that first production of *Glide Time*?' None were to be found.

The New Zealand Theatre Archive

The New Zealand Theatre Archive was incorporated under the Charitable Trusts Act 1957 on May 29, 1997. The original Board of Trustees, who had been meeting for some time to decide on a constitution for the organization, comprised people from the world of theatre: some such as Bill Sheat and Pat Hawthorne had been involved in the early days of Downstage; the Theatre Federation (Judy Russell) and Toi Whakaari/the New Zealand Drama School (Ruth Graham) were represented, as well as the

academic research community (Drs David Carnegie and John Thompson); representatives of the library and archives community (Jim Traue and Rowena Cullen), and longstanding theatre critic Laurie Atkinson were also included. The involvement of all potential stakeholders was an important and deliberate feature of the composition of the Trust Board, and as the Constitution notes, the Board of Trustees would seek

to recognize the existing collecting agencies, the professional theatres, the wider theatre community, and the universities and their common long term objectives to promote interest in and awareness of the need for preservation of New Zealand's theatre heritage.

The charitable status of the Trust was essential to the Board, and is conscientiously maintained in order to preserve the Board's eligibility to apply for public and community funds. Grants from the Lotteries Board and the Lion Foundation have been essential and generous sources of funding in the past, and the Trust Board could not have achieved anything without them (although it would have to be noted that the current funding environment is not sympathetic to organisations of this kind).

Clearly, as can be seen from the brief account above, there are some theatre archives in existence, and a number of histories. McLintock makes use of sources such as Hurst's *New Zealand Theatre: Music and Stage in New Zealand* (1943), *New Zealand Theatre and Motion Picture Magazine*, which ran from 1920 to 1950, Simpson's *A Survey of the Arts in New Zealand*, and J and R Reid's *Prompt Book* (1961). Individual histories of local repertory societies and theatre groups have been published, not to mention John Smythe's detailed narrative *Downstage Upfront: the First 40 Years of New Zealand's Longest-running Professional Theatre* (VUP, 2004), and Nicholas Tarling's *Wit, Eloquence and Commerce: A History of Auckland's Mercury Theatre* (Connaught, 2007). Some of the Mercury Theatre Company archives had already been deposited in Auckland City Archives when Theresa Graham and her team were summoned by the liquidators to rescue what remained in 1992. The Fortune Theatre archives (and Roger Hall's papers) are held by the Hocken Library, and there are some records of Circa and Downstage in the Alexander Turnbull Library. But overall the picture is patchy, and much valuable material is still held by individuals, unprotected and uncatalogued.

As it set out on its mission to remedy this situation, the New Zealand Theatre Archive defined its core tasks as being to:

- enhance awareness among theatre practitioners, both amateur and professional, of the importance of preserving New Zealand's theatre heritage;
- develop knowledge and understanding in the theatre community of how this should be achieved;
- support theatre groups in the management and preservation of their archives;
- identify all theatre archives held by repositories, theatre organisations and individuals, list them to enhance access to them, and encourage theatres and individuals to place their archives in secure repositories.

In pursuit of these goals a number of projects, the first of which was fund-raising, got underway. Early and substantial grants from the National Library of New Zealand, the Macklin Bequest, the Lion Foundation, and the Wellington Community Trust, not to mention the personal generosity of some of the Trustees, enabled the work of the Trustees to get underway, and Dame Kate Harcourt accepted the position of Patron – a position she still holds.

The Macklin Bequest grant enabled the Trustees to employ archivist Ellen Ellis in a part-time capacity to start work on the first major project, the creation of a database listing archives held by various theatre personnel, as well as repositories holding theatre archives (and what those archives consisted of). This database was created in DB Textworks, the data collected by surveying all theatre groups, individuals, and repositories that could be identified. A productive partnership was developed with Victoria University of Wellington (the School of English, Theatre and Film, as it was then), which provided shared office space, a networked pc, and an email address, and later hosted the NZTA web site. The database, which currently has more than 350 entries has now been copied to The Community Archive (the former National Register of Archives and Manuscripts) maintained by Archives New Zealand, and thus is publicly accessible and searchable via the Internet. Ongoing work to increase the number of entries, keep entries and contact details up to date, and get a new generation of theatre practitioners to report what they are personally holding, (not to mention the ongoing effort to cajole some leading theatre practitioners to contribute records of the archives they hold) is one of the Trust's main activities.

The next major projects of the Trust Board were to publish a brochure that could be distributed through theatres, Playmarket, at workshops, and any events promoting theatre history, and the creation of a manual to advise groups and individuals how to care for their theatre archives.

This was also a task undertaken for the Trust by Ellen Ellis. The manual *Caring for Your Theatre Archives* was first published in 2005 and reprinted in 2008, before being revised and updated in 2014 with the help of publishing students from Whitireia Polytechnic to be issued as an e-book available on the Playmarket web-site. The manual, of which over 150 copies have been sold, and which has been used by many community organisations beyond the theatre community, and by Rosemary Collier in the community archive training courses she has run for many years, was reviewed in *Archifacts* in 2008 (after the reprint). Reviewer Deirdre Wogan noted that, in contrast to other manuals, *Caring for your Theatre Archives* makes no assumptions about a group's expertise and does not make any assumptions about budget. As she notes, it has

an unusual manual format, directed at groups with little or no archival background. It begins with a Guide to the Manual: a series of questions posed to help the group decide whether or not to look after their own archives. The questions are set out with two possible answers: choose 'yes' and the guide directs the reader to an appropriate chapter; choose 'no' and the manual warns of the possible consequences and suggests alternatives. For example, having established that the group holds theatre records and archives, the manual asks the question: 'Do you want to keep them in your custody, permanently or temporarily?' If the group decides on transfer to a suitable repository the manual provides a list of repositories for theatre archives and an indication of the kind of preparation required before transfer. If the group decides to manage its own archives, further questions refer the reader to appropriate chapters in the Manual ... Chapter formats are standardised: each begins with general information and definitions, going on to issues to consider and procedures to follow to complete a task. The language is clear and straightforward, definitions are introduced as they are needed, tasks are dealt with in a practical way, and theory is kept to a minimum while still covering the essentials of provenance, original order and record series.

This simplicity is one of the factors in the manual's success (which hopefully will continue with the electronic version). Copies are found around the world and in 2012 the Trustees were delighted to receive a communication from the American Theatre Archive Program, enquiring about reproducing it for their own use. While the Trustees worried about intellectual property issues, and what, if anything to charge as a royalty, the ATAP eventually decided to make use of a number of sources, and while acknowledging the NZTA manual, made less direct use

of it than expected. Their manual, available online on their web-site⁹ as a downloadable pdf file under a creative commons license, takes a more traditional approach, and assumes that the company interested in archiving has offices and staff (and some stability) and that a professional archivist will be involved.

Once the core tasks were underway, and acutely aware that some 'old war-horses' of the contemporary New Zealand theatre scene were starting to take their final bows, the NZTA decided to take a more proactive role in preserving theatre history. Application was made to the New Zealand Oral History Awards (originally established as part of the Sesquicentennial Fund), and subsequently to the Lotteries Board for the recording of oral histories of notable theatre personalities. A total of 16 oral histories have to date been commissioned by the Trust, funded through these sources and private donations. Most are listed on the NZTA web page, and all are lodged in the Alexander Turnbull Library with appropriate indexing and summary of contents.

As the World Wide Web became a more dominant form of communication, the NZTA realized that it could reach far more people through a web-site than by brochures and workshops alone. The web-site, hosted by Victoria University, and created in Dreamweaver was intended to duplicate the brand and logo of the original brochure, designed by Roger Joyce in startling red with a logo intended to capture the look and feel of a theatre poster from colonial times.

It also made extensive use of photographs from historic productions (all of which initially had mouse rollover identifications). The web-site (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/nzta/index.htm>) explains the mission and main activities of the Trust, the database, the manual and the oral

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archives, and links to repositories, theatre groups, and other theatre archives around the world. That web site, which is currently under redesign and reconstruction, has become increasingly difficult for the organisation to maintain, as the University has brought in stricter controls on web authoring, and templates for content. It has become difficult to keep the web-site up-to-date, and looking fresh. A number of Trustees began to feel that these constraints and the ready availability of free and reliable web-hosting sites would make it possible for the Trust to take back responsibility for its web-site and have it independently hosted. This is in progress.

### **Reinventing the NZTA as Theatre Archives New Zealand and Reaching Out to Fringe Theatre and the Archives Community**

Recently the New Zealand Theatre Archive adopted a new trading name Theatre Archives New Zealand. We are currently in the middle of rebranding, and the current focus of the Trust Board is on a reinvention or re-engineering process that will see the organization better placed to survive, and move forward in the 21st century. A series of hui and planning meetings in 2013 and 2014 have focused on ensuring the sustainability of the organization, and its relevance to contemporary theatre in New Zealand. Firstly, this has meant looking at its financial security. Like all small community organizations, Theatre Archives New Zealand lives hand to mouth. Grants never include overheads, and there is no subscription-paying membership who contribute funds in return for specific benefits. The benefits of our work are diffuse and long term. This also makes web-based solicitation of funds (such as Pledgeme and Give-a-Little) a little tricky unless they are focused on a specific personality or theatre group perceived to be 'at risk', and in need of our intervention.

The approach that has been adopted under the rubric 'sustainability' is to acquire more stable and financially secure partners – hence the MoU signed with the University of Victoria, and more recently with Playmarket. Not that it is correct to say that Playmarket is very secure financially, but it is a larger organisation, with an income stream, and it sees its mission as very closely aligned with ours. In addition, the re-issuing of the manual as an e-book through Playmarket enhances the income stream of both Playmarket and Theatre Archives NZ and we anticipate a pro-active marketing plan for the manual in 2015.<sup>10</sup>

Equally important is the development of closer relationships with other theatres and community groups. Despite several attempts in recent years to reach more theatre practitioners, especially some of the new

younger stars (directors, actors and companies) emerging on the theatre scene, we have had virtually no responses to our requests to people to complete our survey form which records what archives they personally hold, or what their group holds. We are trying to change our message and focus more on what we want theatre personnel to do, that is, to realize the value of their archives, to care for them properly and deposit them regularly, and we are trying to focus less on telling our story. It's a good story and we feel we have a number of achievements in our short history, but it is not our key message. So we are rebranding, with new colours, a new logo, a new brochure, and a new web-site (not to mention our FaceBook page), all of which must reflect our new message. "What you're doing is really important and interesting – let's make sure proper archives are kept."

One of our most important partnerships moving forward is with the professional archives community. Those who work in the collecting archives field, and in the repositories themselves, know well how valuable this material is. Every one of these professional archivists is also a member of their own community, participating in the life of their community and often attending theatre and arts events. This puts them in an ideal position to act as a catalyst in this important endeavour, to go out into the community, to take the opportunity when going to a show to talk to the cast and director about archiving, or contact theatre groups in their own neighborhood. A partnership between the archives profession and Theatre Archives New Zealand could ensure that the message gets out to this emerging group of young theatre practitioners – that the importance of archiving in this key area of artistic endeavour in New Zealand is both recognised and promoted. The Theatre Archives New Zealand Board of Trustees is considering developing a new form of membership or associateship that would allow archivists to form a closer liaison with the Trust, and share in the endeavor.

So this is a call to all archivists who love New Zealand theatre and would be happy to be ambassadors for Theatre Archives New Zealand. Let's all get involved in saving our theatre heritage. Contact us at: [theatrearchivesNZ@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:theatrearchivesNZ@vuw.ac.nz) for brochures, or to become a friend or associate. Contact your local theatre groups to see if you can help them ensure that their archives are well cared for, and encourage them to place them in your repository.

**Endnotes**

1. This paper is based on a presentation to the Specialist Collections session at the Joint ASA/ ARANZ conference, Connecting: Past, Present and Future, on Wednesday 1 October 2014.
2. At this point we should acknowledge the theatricality as well as the deep meaning of much Maori ritual, protocol, and social performance such as the haka, and the vitality of contemporary Maori theatre which draws on these traditions.
3. McIntock, A.H. ed. *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 1966.
4. Where the Midcity Cinema was until recently. A brass plaque was placed there in 2003.
5. McIntock, *ibid*.
6. Millar, Nola. Dramatic Societies, in *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, ed A.H. McIntock, 1966.
7. Barrowman, Rachel. *A Popular Vision: the Arts and the Left in New Zealand, 1930-1950*. Wellington, VUW Press, 1991.
8. Mark Derby. 'Theatre companies and producers – Theatre companies since the 1970s', Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 21-Oct-14 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/theatre-companies-and-producers/page-4>
9. <http://www.americantheatrearchiveproject.org/atap-manual-preserving-theatrical-legacy>
10. The e-manual is available at: <http://www.playmarket.org.nz/bookshop/products/caring-your-theatre-archives>