

ELLERSLIE THEATRICAL SOCIETY
PRESIDENT'S REPORT – 19 APRIL 2021

Introduction

Although we watched 2020 roll out in slow motion it was, naturally, chugging along at the usual pace, as it seems like it was only last weekend that I was putting my 2019 report together. This may be a result of only putting on one play since the last AGM. It was important to place the theatre on hold for the remainder of 2020 while the committee paused to assess how a theatre could operate with the pandemic lollypop lady holding up the stop/go sign. I will start my report with an ever-short review of 2020, move on to the programme of 2021 and then the operation review of the society.

Review of 2020

2020 opened with a line-up of four plays. **PROOF**, written by David Auburn and directed by Carl Drake was first up. With an incredible set, designed by Keith Harding, and a strong cast Carl delivered a play that will be remembered and treasured. Having to close early due to the arrival of COVID and a cast illness resulted in the depletion of our remaining working capital which you will see in the trading accounts.

Main bill two had already been cancelled, while David Blakey focused on grant applications to raise funds for venue hire, and the committee resolved to cancel the remaining shows for the year.

As David had a number of venue hire grant applications in place, we found ourselves in the position of being awarded some of these without venue hire costs to use this money towards, so we started planning ahead.



The final event for the year was for the Ellerslie Business Association's Santa Parade held on the first Sunday of December. As the theatre had been block booked for every Sunday morning by a church group, we needed to find a new space to put the float together. Thank you to Kiwi Self Storage for generously allowing us to use their parking bay and Flowers of St John for the delicious scones for morning tea. I also extend a huge thank you to Renee Palmer who managed to pull the 'Christmas at the Beach' scene together with no allocated budget. And finally, thank you to all the volunteers who worked on this throughout the day. The crowds enjoyed the float, especially the surprise mermaids sheltering in their cave at the tail end of the float.

The current year – 2021



Our experience with **PROOF** and observations with the changing social distancing levels made us think about how we could put a play together to reduce the impact of the fluctuating levels. The main barrier was the time we had booked for the theatre to run a season and what would happen if we lost our place. We asked the council if we could leave our set on the stage and just hold off until returning to levels two or one. They were fine with this on the proviso it did not impact on other hirers who had booked the stage. Given that it was unpredictable when a community outbreak would occur, we realised a stage extension with this restriction was not an option. The next best thing was to consider set designs that would not only be relatively simple to construct, but easy to strike and reset should we need to vacate the stage before the season had completed.

We started this year with **SHAM** written by Jess Sayer and directed by Merrin Cavel. While managing to dodge the Level 3,2,3 yo-yo, the cast continued with some online rehearsals. Thanks go to Charlotte Laus for a clever set design as we managed to complete the set over two weekends, which was just as well, as we couldn't get back into the theatre again until the double tech rehearsal. I am exceptionally proud of the production and thank Merrin and the wonderful actors, who held the audience in the palms of their hands for entire play, for this. Sadly, the audience numbers were minimal, a combination of COVID levels and lack of funding for heavy advertising.

Bruce Brown is the director for the Oscar Wilde classic **THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY** as adapted by Neil Bartlett as Main Bill 2. Although there are still some roles to be cast, the rehearsals are underway.

Main Bill Three is an adaption of Graham Greene's **OUR MAN IN HAVANA**. Although we shuffled the dates to make this production time slot work for James Bell, he has had to withdraw for another production at Pumphouse Theatre and we now have David Blakey directing.

Main Bill Four is the biennial **ELLERSLIE FESTIVAL OF ONE ACT PLAYS**. We have received a handful of submissions and will continue to push this to collate a season of six plays made up of two groups of three plays performing on alternating shows.

GOVERNANCE

Budgets & Expenditure: Rona Colbert will shortly be presenting the 2020 accounts. Although we were awarded and received several grants in 2020, most have been carried forward to the 2021 financial year.

Grants received:

- The Lion Foundation \$8,488 towards venue hire 2020
- Mt Wellington Foundation Limited \$5,000 towards venue hire 2020
- Creative Communities Scheme \$1,105 towards publicity in 2020 and 2021
- Orakei Local Board \$2,000 towards performance rights in 2021
- Foundation North \$9,000 towards venue hire 2021

The grant from The Lion Foundation of \$8,488 had to be refunded earlier this year as we were not able to use this in 2020. We have just been advised they have awarded us \$10,000 towards venue hire for 2021. Although

we are needing to nut out some fund-raising activities to replenish our working capital, and quickly, at least we have our venue hire costs covered for the next five months.

A big thank you to everyone who has generously donated to the society over the last year and continued with paying their membership fees. Every dollar donated makes us a dollar stronger.

Management: The committee members elected at the 2020 AGM have remained in place. Carolyn Loader is not running again this year although we hope she will continue as part of the Ellerslie Theatre family with Stage Management and ongoing support.

Tina Dsouza came on board last year to review and drive our publicity and we all want to help her succeed on this front.

I am giving notice that although I am standing for President this year, I will not be standing again in 2022. I became Acting President towards the end of 2012 and am finding the dual responsibilities of this role and production manager are not sustainable personally, nor is it in the best long-term interests of the society. A president who can focus on strategy and drive recruitment is vital for the continuity of the society.

OPERATIONAL

Volunteers and Membership: The income from financial members was 50% of the previous year which, given the year, was still more than I thought we would receive. Members of Men's Shed East Auckland continue to give us tremendous support with set building and setting up for shows and packing out at the end of the season.

While my energies have been focused on the issues surrounding the venue, productions and finding ways to continue operating around pandemic protocols, I have not been able to drive recruitment and publicity, and these are essential elements for successful seasons and ultimately the continuity of the society.

Raffle: We have continued running a raffle but the gain from this is dependent on audience numbers, so it only contributed a small amount to our fund-raising last year.

Bar: The Auckland Council team in charge of facility hire have imposed a new cost on anyone selling alcohol in their premises and now insist on providing a Security Guard for each show at a cost of \$90 per performance. This is not a requirement of having a bar license but purely for the hire of the venue. Attempts to apply for a permanent exemption, given our 30-year good record and relationship with the venue, have been declined although we have a waiver until the end of their current booking year – that is until the end of the **DORIAN GRAY** season. This increases venue costs by \$3600 per year and means the bar would not be cost efficient to run. Additionally, this charge only applies to those with a bar license, who must provide responsible people, and not the party hirers. In our view it is the party hirers causing damage to the building, resulting in police and fire brigade callouts, that has led to this ruling. We are working on this as, despite numerous requests, we have still not been given the official ruling information nor a contact person to discuss it with.

Publicity & Marketing: I recommend, subject to having sufficient funds, using Phantom Billstickers again for advertising as we found this worked well with **THINGS I KNOW TO BE TRUE** in 2019. We need to generate good audiences for each play.

Programme & Directors: We have booked the venue again this year to present the 2022 Tasters and have received some director submissions for plays.

Venue: We have received several suggestions for an alternative venue and although we have followed up, these have not turned out to be available or suitable. I have made enquiries regarding space at the buildings

formally held by Auckland University with the Tamaki campus and have someone following up with the current owners. They have a ten-year apartment build plan so there may be an opportunity there.

Dolphin Theatre was able to provide rehearsal space at a reduced cost for **SHAM** up to the time of the second set build. This was a one-off as it coincided with a play they were able to rehearse directly on their stage, so could accommodate us in their rehearsal hall. The total venue hire cost for the season (Dolphin and Auckland Council) came to around \$4,800. Admittedly, some rehearsals and two set build Saturdays for SHAM were cancelled without charge during the March Level 3 requirements and this reduced the costs as well. This is compared to the total for our current production of DORIAN GRAY which will be around \$6,700. We have managed to reduce our bookings to the absolute minimum to get to this amount and it now means we sometimes have to dismantle and reset the raked seating and front of house area on several occasions during a show season. It's still around \$30,000 per year.

Finding alternative club rooms for rehearsal space while continuing to use Stables Theatre for set builds and shows could be an option although any savings would be soaked up with the new security guard charges.

Summary

We are facing an uncertain future. With COVID, hiked venue hire costs, no working capital and a number of production roles to be recruited there is a lot of work ahead. We can continue to raise funds to cover venue hire and operate one production at a time or locate alternative premises.

The tasks of recruitment, venue sourcing and fund-raising require a larger committee or group of sub-committees to be formed as the committee does not have the resources to drive this while simultaneously producing shows. We are an aging society and need the next wave of drivers, producers, and doers if we are to see the theatre continue.