



# theatre

## Peter Falkenberg; (Director Free Theatre) Looks at Theatre in Christchurch

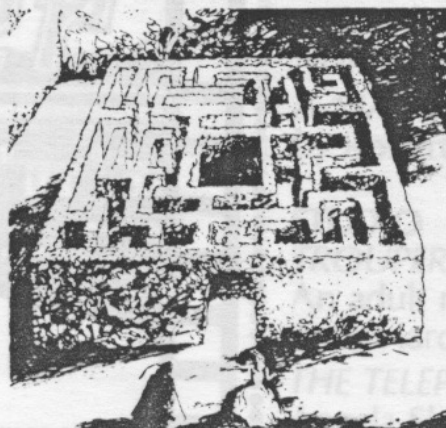
If you want to find out about the cultural life of a town, one of the quickest ways is to go to its theatre performances. There you find the most direct expression of the consciousness of the social elite of a community. The choice of plays, the way they are performed, the expectations of the audience, its reaction to the performance: all these can facilitate a subtle and differentiated understanding of the taste of a town, at least for an observer that expects from a theatre performance more than just a good night out.

There are two commonplaces about Christchurch's theatre audiences: they are very keen and they are very conservative. As with most commonplaces they may be true, but they need an explanation. It is true that the Court Theatre, the only professional theatre in Christchurch, fared better in recent years, audiencewise and financially, than all the other professional theatres in New Zealand; there is also a wealth of amateur theatres in Christchurch. It is also true that the Court Theatre caters for a very stable, middle-class audience providing a respectable evening for a wide range from blue rinses to blue-eyed boys and girls from third form onwards. And it is almost always true that the amateur theatres (with variations) emulate the Court Theatre style and cater mostly for the same audiences, with the difference that their audiences are more specialised: they tend to patronise only performances of their own theatre, but almost as a matter of principle never attend other amateur theatre performances.

It can be said that Christchurch amateur theatres are rather endearing enterprises and sometimes they are even more adventurous than the Court Theatre, but on the whole you can see them as an expression of the New Zealand do-it-yourself ideology: I don't need a painter to paint my roof, I don't need a carpenter to build my verandah, so I don't need to pay to see other people make a fool of themselves on stage, I can do that myself, and it is more fun too—and right they are.

It would perhaps be fairer to go into a more detailed description of the Christchurch amateur theatre scene, but as most of these theatre enterprises do not try to be really different from the Court Theatre (Riccarton Players may be an exception), however much they may claim to reject what is being done there, it is more profitable to embark on a closer analysis of this Christchurch professional theatre.

It is a fine thing to have a theatre that is proud of its being professional. Professionalism in the arts can, however, be a dubious thing. The only true definition of professionalism is that you get money for what you are doing and it is not a matter of being good or bad at it. After all, the All Blacks are amateurs. But it needs a lot of guts and pride in this Rugby Country to become a professional actor, especially as a male. With it comes a lot of insecurity and a craving for approval. This can lead to a situation in which a theatre in order to be taken seriously as an institution, as well as in order to survive financially, falls over backwards to be popular.



*Leonard & Lena*  
a comedy by George B. S. ...  
Free Theatre | Arts Centre | 100 Leston Ave.

**Court Theatre**  
LIVE ENTERTAINMENT AT ITS VERY BEST

Murray Ball.

**FOOTROT FLATS**

book by ROGER HALL lyrics by A.K. GRANT music by PHILIP NORMAN  
based on original characters created by MURRAY BALL

This is what has happened to theatre in Christchurch. The general trend goes from theatre as "art" (whatever that means) to theatre as showbusiness. For the last four or five years the Court Theatre seems to have been looking, in most of its major productions, for a formula of success rather than for its own identity as a theatre. The formula it has mostly tried to follow is the well-worn one of the London West End theatre.

This means popular farcical comedies or musicals; even the encouragingly regular performance of new New Zealand plays often follows a popular trend of Kiwi narcissism without the necessary self-analysis that might lead to really indigenous theatre forms. The ultimate formula has now been found in FOOTROT FLATS and there seems to be no reason why there should ever be another play performed in the Court; the audience surely would come for the next ten years, if the show was regularly updated like the cartoon.

This means star theatre instead of ensemble theatre. The productions are centred around the protagonists and their idiosyncracies and the direction does not pay too much attention to the rest of the cast, so that there is a wide variation in the quality of the acting in one show.

This means lavish, costly, cinemascope production, which provide a feast for the eyes and let you forget that the Court Theatre venue is actually very intimate and relatively small.

This means a slick, fast paced style of acting, where the actors move and speak as fast as they can and as loudly, as if they were in the Theatre Royal (and consequently there is no problem in shifting productions into it).

And you end up with a theatre, where you go in order to escape from your daily life into a world of glamour and make-believe, which is almost as "good" as imported television (sometimes Norman Bowler even comes here in person!); in short, a theatre to look and laugh in, but not a theatre to think and feel and learn in.

This kind of trend has obvious dangers. The actors ultimately feel that they prostitute themselves for money and accordingly become cynical. The public in the long run get tired of finding what they have expected, and there were signs last year of the public staying away. In the final analysis this kind of theatre just cannot be taken seriously, except by most Christchurch theatre critics, who are all amateurs, unlike their colleagues from the sports section. That newspapers do not actually take trouble over a professional coverage of the most public expression of the cultural life of a country is an amazing and illuminating fact.

When Martin Esslin, the famous B.B.C. and theatre personality, was in Christchurch recently he claimed that we had good rugby here, because we had good rugby critics. Most theatre criticism here comes either from persons with not much knowledge of the history or background of drama and theatre, or from persons without a vision of theatre. It is also often coloured by personal jealousies or allegiances. The critics' insecurity is most exposed when theatres take risks or try to do new things, as the critics then find fault in what is different and what they do not understand. On the other hand, they are much too "nice" and parochial in their praise of the familiar. A non-parochial analysis of theatre in Christchurch cannot be nice and should not be polite.

There are more positive aspects and tendencies, however: firstly there are many talented and interesting actors and actresses here. If one sees the present development of professional theatre here as a necessary stage, then perhaps the next stage might be that some of these talented people start a

process of emancipating themselves as artists. Some Court Studio productions especially have already shown evidence of such a development. What is really tragic is that a beautiful, eminently flexible theatre space like the former Court Studio had to be changed into the usual boring tiered box. It still could and hopefully will again be a venue for more experimental and innovative productions, which was the original justification for its being built.

The traditional middle-class audience that uses theatre as a status symbol and decoration of their lives may be a financial necessity for a thoroughly commercial theatre, but they do not justify yearly grants of \$300,000 and more. A professional, community-supported theatre, in Christchurch also has the duty to find new audiences and to educate them and its own actors. An important function of theatre surely is to raise social consciousness rather than dull it.

Outside the professional theatre the university drama society may be game for more innovative theatre productions, although there has not been enough evidence of this in recent years. Rock bands and pub theatre could have excellent access to a new audience; in fact, a group called Soluble Fish was a valid, if too "soluble", attempt to create some new theatre solutions. Some Arts Centre P.E.P. groups like Japonica Jam and the stilts group Splinta showed possibilities of freer theatre forms. Japonica Jam was recently allowed to use the Court Theatre and Splinta may venture into co-operation with a Marae and perhaps find new theatrical inspiration there.

One of these P.E.P.-supported groups worked in the Free Theatre. This is not only a new venue for intimate and experimental theatre in Christchurch, but also it harbours a group that is committed to an alternative theatre in this town. Free does not imply no entrance fee. It refers whoever to the European tradition of "Free" theatres which—in contrast to the traditional theatres that support the status quo and are run in hierarchical fashion—are experimental and critical of the cultural or political status quo. These theatres have a tradition of being fiercely counter-attacked, frequently by the establishment of the time. This seems to happen to the Free Theatre in Christchurch. Some Christchurch theatre-goers and critics have been offended by its "arrogance", as it is sometimes called when somebody dares to be different and does not want to fulfil the usual expectations. Even the Arts Centre itself has taken sides against the theatre in a noise nuisance dispute on behalf of a few individual, commercial tenants living in inexpensive luxury flats above the theatre. It wants the theatre to move out of the Arts Centre and thus deprive Christchurch of its only alternative theatre.

This seems utterly absurd. However, it can be seen as symptomatic of the nature of theatre and society in Christchurch. The Christchurch Club of the privileged holds tightly together and clobbers anybody who threatens its exclusiveness. Nothing must ever change. Theatre and the arts are just another monopoly that has to be protected. So in the end theatre in Christchurch may well reflect the reality of life in Christchurch after all.

## Suddenly life was more than french fries, gravy and girls

"A small gem! Wonderfully cast and played . . . a banquet of fast food and funny talk"

—TIME MAGAZINE

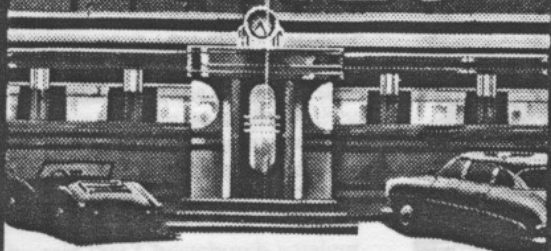
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