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Christchurch musicals: Should they be more adventurous?

Charlie Gates · 14:12, Nov 25 2016

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COURT THEATRE

The Mary Poppins musical was The Court Theatre's Christmas show in 2015.

Christchurch people have an appetite for musicals.

We bought 45,000 tickets for three musicals at the Isaac Theatre Royal this

year and support an eight-week run of a musical at the the Court Theatre every Christmas.

Christchurch theatre company Showbiz this week announced its 2017 season of two hit Broadway musicals and a Rodgers and Hammerstein concert, while the Court Theatre's new production of *Legally Blonde: The Musical* opens on Saturday.

But are The Court Theatre and Showbiz choosing the right musicals to stage in the city? And are they being staged in a modern and innovative way?

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MICHAEL SMITH | FOR
AUCKLAND THEA

That Bloody Woman was a hit at The Court Theatre this year and ran for four weeks.

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A Christchurch acting teacher doesn't think so. She claims that musical theatre in the city is conservative, out of date and unadventurous. Court and Showbiz bosses disagree, saying they have to choose shows that are financially viable, but try to take creative risks when they can.

Head of acting at the National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art (NASDA), Soseh Yekanians, says Christchurch theatre companies should be more daring.

SHOWBIZ CHRISTCHURCH

Showbiz Christchurch's production of Phantom of the Opera at Isaac Theatre Royal in April 2015.

"Christchurch loves

its musicals. It is such a big supporter of musicals, so what a great opportunity to show them what is out there. They should look beyond what they have done over the last 20 years.

"While aesthetically attractive and technically proficient, on the whole, the work in Christchurch lacks innovation and adventurousness"

She says a more diverse group of people should direct Christchurch musicals.

KIRSTY MACDONALD

Puppet musical Avenue Q was staged by Showbiz in 2013.

"It is always the same directors and the same musical directors."

"There are so many young and exciting directors out there,

but it is always the same people that put on shows so it is always the same aesthetic and the same temperament.

"Things are being told in the same way they were told 40 years ago."

Showbiz should stage more new musicals, she says.

"Showbiz needs to take risks."

"Christchurch can have that safe show that everyone wants to see and then the other two could take a risk and see what happens."

Showbiz general manager Michael Bayly says the company chose popular musicals to help the company financially recover after an earthquake-enforced hiatus. The company was without a

theatrical home
for four years after
the 2011
earthquakes closed
the Isaac Theatre
Royal.

"I know that
Christchurch has a
desire for more
diversity in musical
theatre," Bayly says.

"We have every
intention of fulfilling
that in future years,
but right now we are
rebuilding from the
back of our
earthquake hiatus.

"We have completed
three years of
rebuilding, but the
future will see greater
diversity."

Bayly also says the
company will choose
more diverse
musicals once
smaller and cheaper
venues reopened in
Christchurch.

"The Christchurch
public is ready and
willing for diversity,

but they will not
come out in their tens
of thousands.

"Playing a beautiful
and extremely large
venue like the Isaac
Theatre Royal, we
couldn't stage
obscure or unknown
shows.

"Allow us to rebuild
and succeed and
then on the back of
success will come
greater diversity."

The earthquakes
have also impacted
on the Court
Theatre's ability to
stage more daring
material. The Court
has not had a
dedicated
performance space
for its edgier partner
company, The Forge,
since the 2011
earthquakes. Court
Theatre artistic
director
Ross Gumbley says
the Forge was
important because it
helped develop young

talent..

"The Forge is where we can take genuine risks. When we have a dedicated studio we can develop practitioners.

"That is a really important step that this company has lost."

Gumbley says large-scale musicals are not the place to foster young directorial talent.

"We are beholden to support and develop talent, but when you are putting something on like *Legally Blonde* that is not in any way entry level. There are so many balls in the air that you want to go with a safe pair of hands.

"We don't want to throw a young director onto a big project and have them perish. That

would be damaging to their career. It is a big step up."

Bayly says they choose popular musicals because margins are tight in the arts sector.

"Staging a musical is an intensely expensive exercise," says Bayly

"If we were to do extremely obscure shows our audience would be there, but in far smaller numbers.

"If we lose a lot of money we will cease to exist. We live off our ticketing revenue. We are not a government-funded organisation."

Gumbley agrees.

"First and foremost, we have to keep the theatre open.

"In a good year, we break even. We have a 400 seat house, so it has to be plays with

appeal.

"The musical is a massive roll of the dice for us. The budgets are huge on those shows."

He says the Christmas musical is often a popular choice, but they try to take risks in other parts of their season.

"It's impossible for me to think of a musical we are doing out of the context of a season."

"We couldn't play something risky for eight weeks over Christmas. If we can take a risk elsewhere in our season, we do.

"It is a question of balance."

He points to hit musical *That Bloody Woman* as an example of innovative musicals staged in Christchurch. The show is a punk rock

musical about suffragette Kate Sheppard written by Christchurch locals Luke di Somma and Gregory Cooper. It was commissioned by the Christchurch Arts Festival, but partly developed in Court workshops. It ran for four weeks at The Court earlier this year.

"I would argue that *That Bloody Woman* is incredibly adventurous."

Yekanians says the success of the show should encourage greater innovation.

"*That Bloody Woman* should show the industry that it pays off.

"People are so excited about New Zealand stories, so why don't we see that?"

**What musicals have
The Court and**