

When Christchurch was the centre of new theatre

Free Theatre, a film about contemporary theatre in Christchurch

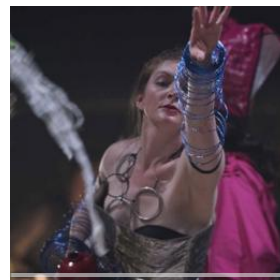


By **John Daly-Peoples**

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Free Theatre

Directed by Shirley Horrocks

New Zealand International Film Festival

Academy Cinema

July 26 & 28

Shirley Horrocks has been one of the most influential New Zealand filmmakers, documenting New Zealand artists and art institutions including painter John Reynolds, poet Allen Curnow, sculptor Len Lye and dramatist Roger Hall.

She also produced *Dance of the Instant*, which told the story of The New Dance Group, which was the first major modern dance groups to operate in post-war Wellington from 1945 to 1947.

Now she has produced *Free Theatre*, a film about the contemporary theatre group founded by Peter Falkenberg in 1979. The group has provided a remarkably persistent alternative to the city's more vaunted legacy of traditional theatre. Favouring the event-based over the text-based, Falkenberg has steeped a succession of actors, writers and theatre technicians in the practice of an avant-garde theatre that has strong roots in his native Germany, while being constantly responsive to political and social change.

Shirley Horrocks' film draws on Free Theatre's extensive archive of its own work. Free Theatre has often courted controversy and the film is studded with remembered provocations: Audiences at a production of *1984* were separated from their friends and even forcibly evicted by costumed security guards.

But Horrocks, who began shooting seven years ago when she first encountered Free Theatre's touring production *Distraction Camp*, is especially observant of the shift in focus and a less combative – though no less satiric – imaginative engagement with community activation since the earthquakes.

Thirty-seven years on Free Theatre has proven as definitive and resilient a Christchurch institution as the one it set out to oppose – and richly deserving of this salute from New Zealand's most dedicated and attentive documentarian of art and artists.

By **John Daly-Peoples**

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