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Natalie Parsons
Venues Manager
Mount Alexander Shire Council
27 Lyttleton St, Castlemaine VIC 3450

Dear Natalie,

As a representative of The Castlemaine Theatre Company, a community performing arts organisation with a 55-year history of service to the community of Mount Alexander Shire, I was recently invited to an information session about increases to hire charges at the Phee Broadway Theatre. I was staggered and devastated by the news that the **hire fees have been increased by a whopping 150%**. The delivery of this information was met with a stunned silence, while the assembled community representatives attempted to adjust to the fact that this would place the venue out of reach for many of them. There was no suggestion that this would be negotiable or that community groups' special role in the community would be taken into account. Community groups are now effectively locked out of the venue.

It was explained that the increase in fees is due to the new requirement to have a duty technician present at performance venues during the entire period of the booking, at a cost to the hirer of \$49 per hour. Castlemaine Theatre Company bookings average 70 hours over 4 weeks for a production, usually twice a year. This adds \$3500 to a single production budget, an impossible figure for us to absorb without a significant increase to our ticket prices. **As a community organisation we stand for accessibility in arts**, and we don't see why our members and local audiences, many of them seniors and young people, should have to pay exorbitant ticket prices for community productions. **We serve our community, we are not a commercial organisation.**

The Phee Broadway Theatre belongs to us!

At the recent information session MASC staff stated that the money would be utilised to cover our safety and to maintain the venue. It's no secret that MAS rates are amongst the

highest in Regional Victoria, and we expect that our basic safety, not only on our streets and roads, but also in Council venues, should be covered by our rates. Do we now have to pay protection money to the tune of a figure that exceeds both our original booking fee and our entire annual operating budget, to remain safe in Council venues? I wonder if some of the **recently advertised \$1.7 million surplus** in Council revenue might be put aside to cover the cost of the duty technician, rather than burdening community organisations who operate hand to mouth on volunteer labour.

Council at odds with its own policy

The recently published Arts Strategy Action Plan 2015-17 states in its introduction that "The Mount Alexander Arts Strategy 2011 – 2015 aims to achieve the Council Plan 2009 – 2013 objective to:

"Encourage a vibrant community that promotes participation in the arts and an appreciation of our cultural heritage"

The goals and strategies in the Arts Strategy 2011 – 2015 focus on:

- Valuing the vibrant arts and cultural sector's contribution to the Shire;
- Nurturing the sustained growth of arts and cultural industries; and
- Celebrating and promoting cultural activity in Mount Alexander Shire"

One might assume that this new increase in fees means that Council have changed their minds about this strategy, however the document goes on to insist that the 2015-17 Arts Action Plan "builds on the foundation of work already implemented as part of strategy from 2011 – 2015. The Action Plan provides a focus for the work of Council and its partners to further realise the goals of the strategy."

Goal 1: '**Valuing the vibrant arts and cultural sector's contribution** to the Shire', explicitly acknowledges the role of the arts sector: 'In addition to playing an **integral role in the health and wellbeing of the community, arts and culture play a key role in the economic prosperity of the Shire.**'"

Objective 3 within Goal 1 is to "Encourage broad participation in arts and cultural activities"

Goal 2: 'Nurturing the sustained growth of arts and cultural industries' includes Objective 2: **Promote the use of cultural spaces within the Shire to increase opportunities for the creation and experience of arts and culture.**

The outlandish increase in hire fees to the Phee Broadway Theatre flies in the face of stated MASC aims, goals and strategies, which suggest that participation in the arts is valued and encouraged by MASC. Making it impossible for community organisations to use the venue **actively discourages participation, effectively marginalizing and ghettoising these organisations**, forcing a wedge between the professional and community sector. There can be only one of two possibilities:

1. Council is acting at odds with its own policy, or
2. The officially stated MASC aims, goals, objectives and associated action plans are fictional and untrue, simply a cover for Councils genuine objectives

The increase in fees plus Council's persistent inaction in returning the venue to a suitable condition from which to perform theatrical productions will result in the Phee Broadway being used only for lecture style events, principally by the Goldfields Library Corporation

and the MAS staff, and for one-off touring professional theatrical productions. One can only assume that this may be the true objective of the Mount Alexander Shire Council, minimising the effort and cost required for Council to fulfill its responsibilities in the management of the venue. If this is the case, it is frankly unacceptable.

Solutions that won't work

Council staff have suggested that we adjust our operations to avoid extended bookings and do a smaller number of performances, thus aligning with a professional touring company model. As with most community theatre companies, we are staffed entirely by volunteers, and our actors and production teams also work for no pay. This means that many of us have jobs, families, and various other projects to manage. Because of this we can only rehearse evenings and weekends, and our production period runs for a minimum of 3 months. It is grossly unfair to then expect our team to make this huge commitment of their time and energy and creativity, an extraordinarily generous gift, then to be offered a performance run of 3 or 4 shows. As a community organisation we stand for the **ongoing personal, social, creative and professional development of our community** – our actors and crew learn and develop their practice over a full run of nine shows. This time period also allows them to forge unique and sustained bonds with one another, bonds that form the core of mental and emotional health, and the key to great ensemble performances. This provides a significant social benefit to our community.

Our research suggests that our audience numbers are strongly affected by word of mouth, and without an extended run it would be impossible for us to recoup production costs, let alone raise enough revenue to cover our administrative responsibilities as a not-for-profit organisation. Other organisations may be able to do single performances or a very limited run, but these fall into a different category altogether. Taking the example of *Over the Moon*, a fantastic local dance school, who use the Phee for their annual production, *Over the Moon* runs a community-focused business based on their educational program that operates throughout the year – this is their primary business and income stream. Their end of year show is a celebration and a showcase for their students to get some performance experience, and for parents to share their achievements. This means they are guaranteed a large audience for a single performance. This is a completely different situation to the CTC. We produce theatre works. That is why we exist, ticket sales constitute our primary revenue source, and that only happens when we are performing. **We are not a commercial business, and we don't want to be – we just want to produce theatre by and for our community.**

It has also been suggested that we use MASC Strengthening Our Community Grants scheme as a solution to the increase in hire fees. When planning a theatrical production, one of the first things that must be established is the availability and accessibility of the venue. In planning ahead for the year it is practically impossible to rely on the entirely speculative arena of grant applications in order to cover this core budget item, and it would be irresponsible for us to do so.

Solutions that will work

For many years the Castlemaine Theatre Company has employed on a voluntary basis, our own experienced technician, Neil Harrison who is a professional electrician. Council could provide Neil, and other local volunteers, with any additional training required to enable Neil to be our official duty technician. Neil has worked professionally as a theatre technician for The Castlemaine State Festival, *Over the Moon*, and Castlemaine Secondary College.

Alternatively MASC could employ a local person on a casual basis to be the duty technician, and the cost could be absorbed by the Shire.

Council decisions about venues and buildings over recent years have thrown up multiple challenges to the CTC and our capacity to produce theatre. When I joined the company in 2009 we were happily operating out of the Chewton Senior Citizens Centre and the adjacent church. For an annual fee we were provided with performance and rehearsal space, kitchen, access to the hall for front of house requirements and extensive parking facilities that also provided a home for our two shipping containers (where we house props and costumes). When the church was closed due to it's being rendered unsafe through being allowed to fall into disrepair, we were left homeless. We were assured that the venue would re-open when renovations had been completed, but now we have been made aware that Council intends to sell off this community asset. Not long after we had to leave Chewton, Council decided to sell the Old Gaol. A large room at the back of the Gaol had long been in use as a storage space for sets and larger props by The CTC and 3's A Crowd. It was also used as a rehearsal space by 3AC. We were forced out of this venue by the sale, which meant that we had to jettison many of our assets, and spread the rest throughout members' garages. Now we are unable to utilise The Phee Broadway Theatre because of this unfair new charge.

Our community is suffering – we have to deal with youth suicide, drug addiction, and tragically high numbers of suicide amongst our trades workers. Our long-standing cultural organisations don't seem to be able to manage generational change without shattering, losing invaluable intellectual capital and public good will. We *need* community organisations that promote health and wellbeing, and support community cohesion. Theatre is one of the magical places where this happens. My participation in the Castlemaine Theatre Company changed my life – it enabled me to access a wellspring of creativity, connection, fun and professional development. I want this opportunity to be available to anyone in our community who reaches out for it.

Community-based performing arts organisations deserve a voice and a space in the centre of our town, in the centre of our community.

Please listen to the voices of people like this CTC audience member, who recently posted on the CTC facebook page: "You people go beyond dedication and hard work. Simple, brilliant, thanks for entertaining my family for many years and thousands of others, cheers."

If you made it to the end of this letter, thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Kate Stones
Secretary, Castlemaine Theatre Company
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