

What's happening with the Phee?

A brief history of the Phee accessibility problem

Problems with equipment

Early in 2014 there were two 'near miss' accidents at the Phee Broadway Theatre, and both of these were attributed to old equipment that was poorly maintained. Firstly a well-established theatre technician with professional experience was operating for a community theatre organisation, and received a mild electric shock from faulty equipment in the theatre. Not long after this event a professional theatre technician was operating a winch backstage when an object fell from the roof of the theatre, narrowly missing their head. According to those present, it had nothing to do with how equipment was being handled or operated, but was because the equipment had not been properly maintained.

Theatre closed

The Theatre was closed down in May 2014 to address the problems caused by outdated and unmaintained equipment. The Council undertook to renovate the theatre to a 'skeleton' rig and later to bring it up to a more functional standard.

A report was presented to Councillors outlining 3 for the Theatre – basic skeleton, basic theatre and full theatre options and noted a number of operational issues.

At the Ordinary Meeting of Council held on August 14 2014, Council resolved to:

1. Proceed immediately with Option 1, Basic Skeleton Remediation;
2. Prepare a works plan to explore further improvements of the Phee Broadway Theatre;
3. Continue to work closely with user groups to ensure the planned works meet our community's needs; and
4. Explore external funding options and consider the mention of further improvements in the preparation of the 2015/2016 Budget

The Basic Skeleton option provided the absolute minimum of service and a lower level of flexibility for the theatre than was provided before it closed. Funds that were allocated to upgrade the aging lighting equipment in the Phee were rolled into the skeleton works. The lighting equipment has still not been upgraded.

Community groups have been raising issues about the Phee Broadway Theatre from prior to the consultation for the last arts strategy (2010). Issues noted in that strategy relate to booking processes, maintenance and management. Maybe further back??

As of May 2017 the only action that has occurred is to re-open the theatre with a basic skeleton remediation. We have seen no evidence of a "works plan to explore further improvements". Work with user groups has come to a complete standstill,

and there has certainly been no provision made in ensuing budgets for further improvements to the venue to take place.

Inflammatory public statement

On 1st August 2014, then Mayor, Michael Redden went publically on record with this extraordinary comment in relation to Shire's downgrading of the venues technical facilities: "We would be hopeful that anyone that makes just a minimal use of stage space, needs a microphone and a band or something, that you'd be able to put those kind of shows on," he said. "**We think that describes about 90 per cent of the shows that come through.**" This statement has absolutely no factual basis whatsoever; it is clearly ludicrous to suggest that 90 per cent of what happens in a theatre is not theatre.

Theatre re-opened

The Phee reopened for the 2015 Castlemaine State Festival, and a rumour spread about the upcoming hire fee increase. In September of that year the community users of the Phee were invited to the theatre to hear the news from the newly appointed venues manager Natalie Parsons that from now on hirers of the venue would be charged an additional \$49 an hour. There was no community consultation about this 150% rise in hire fees for community groups. For a Castlemaine Theatre Company standard production this would add \$3500 to our budget, a figure which far outstrips our average profit on a production, the upshot of which is that we would be unable to continue operation, within a year or two we would be broke.

Community lobbying

At that meeting ex-MASC staff member Sue Jones advised the community groups, off the record, to agitate, to speak up. As secretary of The Castlemaine Theatre Company I wrote an impassioned letter to the MAS Councilors. Outlining the issues at stake. In January 2016 Artistic Director of 3's A Crowd theatre company, Matt Sheehan followed up with a letter submitted in the form of a petition signed by representatives from four local theatre companies: Three's A Crowd, Castlemaine Theatre Company, Castlemaine Youth Theatre and Such As They Are. The petition outlined a number of suggestions on how to address the problem on accessibility for community organisations, analysing all the issues, detailing case studies from other municipalities, and proposing various short and long term solutions. Sheehan followed up with a budget submission for the year 2016/17. Council continued to work with community user groups, calling a meeting with representatives from those local organisations, from the Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres and The Capital Theatre, Bendigo in April 2016. As a result of this meeting the two Cultural Development Officers formulated a questionnaire to analyse the various community groups usage requirements, the scale of their budgets and productions.

Theatre chronically underutilised

During this period, those organisations who signed the petition were unable to use the Phee due to the massive increase in cost, when formally they had all been regular annual and bi-annual users of the venue. Other schools and community performing arts organisations were also unable to use the space, some even opting

to take their productions as far away as Bendigo, to find better facilities at an affordable price. This created a vicious cycle in which the less the space was utilised, the harder it became to justify the funding of proper maintenance and upgrade of the venue.

At the close of 2016 the Shire CDOs met with representatives from the Castlemaine Theatre Company, Three's A Crowd, Over the Moon Dance Studio, and the Friends of the Castlemaine State Festival represented by Phee Broadway herself, whom the theatre is named in honour of. At this meeting the CDOs outlined a proposal to provide a short-term solution to the problem. A small portion of the Community Grants Funds would be allocated specifically for community users of the Phee Broadway Theatre, to assist in the production of performances at the venue. This would likely be delivered via a Memorandum of Understanding over a 3-year period. This proposal was accepted by the community stakeholders and the CDOs began the process of finalising the proposal. It is my understanding that early in 2017 the proposal was approved by then Director of Sustainable Communities, Vicky Mason, however following her resignation, the proposal went to the Executive Team but has completely stalled since, presumably due to lack of support. This was followed by the resignation of the CODs. The Executive Team has since given no indication of further action to be taken on this issue. The situation has stalled.

At the time of writing, (May 2017) the Mount Alexander Shire have no current Arts Strategy, there is no reference to the Arts anywhere in the draft Council Plan 2017-21, despite the fact that many arts practitioners were involved in the community consultation process, advocating strongly for Arts to be supported in the plan. The Cultural Development Officer position has been cut in half, and an internal appointment has been made. The 'skeleton rig' at the Phee is still in place (despite Councils public undertaking to upgrade the venue facilities) and community groups remain unable to access the venue due to the crippling costs of hire.

Safety at what cost?

Community user groups understand the requirement for safety, and have engaged positively with Council over the last 2 years, in an attempt to find a solution. Sadly the result of all this hard work by community representatives and Council staff, has been a stalemate. The Phee Broadway Theatre remains an under utilised and under maintained, its doors firmly shut to the young people and community groups who have historically used the venue to share their performances with their own community.

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