Auckland Theatre Company presents

The Heartbreak Choir

By Aidan Fennessy

Directed by Lara Macgregor

14 February – 4 March 2023

ASB Waterfront Theatre

This performance is audio described by Kevin Keys & Nicola Owen, Audio Described Aoteraoa

Auckland Theatre Company’s accessible programme is proudly presented by Dentons Kensington Swan

## ABOUT THE PLAY

It’s winter in an old town hall in rural Australia. A disparate group of locals has

left its original choir and its members are meeting to rehearse for the first

time. They’ve got a new name, they’ve got their voices and they’ve got each

other. All they need now is to find a way to harmonise in time for their debut.

The Heartbreak Choir was commissioned with the assistance of Melbourne Theatre Company’s NEXT STAGE Writers’ Program and was first produced by Melbourne Theatre Company in 2022.

The Auckland season of The Heartbreak Choir is the first production in the Auckland Theatre Company 2023 season. It began previews on 14 February and premiered on 16 February at ASB Waterfront Theatre, Auckland.

The production is 2 hours and 20 minutes, including interval.

This show contains coarse language, mature themes, references to sexual assault and references to suicide. Recommended for ages 15+. See a list of assistance services on page 21.

Please remember to switch off all mobile phones and noise-emitting devices.

Principal funders: Creative New Zealand and Auckland Council

## CAST

Esmay August — Savannah

Jodie Dorday — Totty

Kate Louise Elliott — Mack

Dave Fane — Peter

Levi Kereama — Beau

Alison Quigan — Barbara

Munashe Tapfuya — Anesu

## CREATIVE

Playwright — Aidan Fennessy

Director — Lara Macgregor

Musical Director — Jason Te Mete

Production Designer — Sean Coyle

Lighting Designer — Phillip Dexter

Sound Designer — Andrew Furness

Assistant Director — Keagan Carr Fransch

Dialect Coach — Alexandra Whitham

## PRODUCTION

Production Management — Jamie Blackburn, Pilot Productions

Production Management Support — Khalid Parkar, Sam Clavis & Billie Holland, Pilot Productions

Stage Managers — Michael Clark, Lucie Everett-Brown & Keira Howat

Deputy Stage Manager — Chiara Niccolini

Choir Coordinators — Matthew Kereama & Alex Medland

Props Manager — Nati Pereira

Lighting Programmer & Technical Operator — Peter Davison

Audio Mix Engineer — Nathanael Bristow

Set Construction — Tāwhiri Workshop

Construction Supervisor — Alasdair Watson

Set Builders — Geoff Goss, Giovanni Maule, Duncan Perratt, Allan Rockell

Scenic Painters — Josh Boudreau, Nina Kawai

Photographer — Andi Crown

Publicity — Elephant Publicity

# Haere Mai. Welcome.

On Wednesday 11 March 1993, David Geary’s new play Lovelock’s Dream Run had its world premiere, and with it, a daring new venture made its debut. One year to the day since the closure of the Mercury Theatre, Simon Prast and a folly of artists and lovers of theatre created Auckland Theatre Company.

In this programme, Simon reflects on the creation of Auckland Theatre Company in a moving and fascinating essay.

We begin our 30th anniversary year with a heart-warming play all about what it means to love, to lose and to sing, and the power of community. Theatre is all about community. People gathering to laugh, to cry, to sing, to feel. The Heartbreak Choir is brimming with the joy of human connectedness.

We are blessed with a glorious cast to open our 30th season. The rehearsal room has been filled with laugher and touching comradery. Making her directorial debut with Auckland Theatre Company, Lara Macgregor and her team have crafted an insightful and hilarious comedy that sensitively traverses the complexities of life.

This is the New Zealand premiere of the final play by the late, great Aidan Fennessy. Aidan was a loved man of the theatre in Melbourne and his early death meant he did not see the rapturous response from his city to his work. It is a privilege for us to create our own production of this beautiful play.

During 2023, we are asking our supporters to consider a gift to the 30th Anniversary Fund which will underpin our artistic ambition for the next three decade. See the full details on page 27. Donations are vital for our artists to work at the scale of ambition for which our Company is renowned.

Beyond The Heartbreak Choir is a season of big bold plays that survey our theatrical whakapapa and speak to the future. I look forward to

joining you for each tantalising night at the theatre.

Jonathan Bielski

Artistic Director & CEO

# **Note from the Director**

## Lara Macgregor

Why did we begin this choir?
To connect. Only connect.

Everything else is a negation.

As Auckland Theatre Company celebrates its 30th anniversary, I can’t help but think there is no better gift of a story to launch the season.

Aidan Fennessy’s legacy lives in every crevice of this play. It is based around what was one of the joys in his own life – a community choir. A marvellous, ordinary group of argumentative individuals who have been meeting once a week for eight years and who now find themselves battling a moral dilemma that threatens a divide between them and their community.

These characters are subtle, flawed, funny and generous. They’re not grandstanders, high achievers or corporate greeders, but saltof-the-earth heroes that run the risk of being overlooked as central protagonists if we don’t look and listen gently. As crisis creeps into the corners of each of their lives, Aidan artfully distracts us with keen observation of human behaviour,

cloaked in humour and transcendent with the power of music.

One of the joys in working on a new play (The Heartbreak Choir had its premiere at Melbourne Theatre Company in 2022) is being able to connect with the playwright. Sadly, in this instance, Aidan passed away before the play opened its Melbourne season. There’s a great sense of responsibility in bringing a playwright’s words to life and, throughout our rehearsals, that

responsibility has been ever-present.

There was an interview in The Melbourne Age with Aidan’s wife, Nova Weetman, who recalled her experience of watching the play for the first time soon after Aidan’s passing. She talked about how present his voice was, and said that the dialogue was “like a patchwork of our lives together”. Some of the songs were on their children’s playlists and they were often played in the house.

This beautiful and heartbreaking kernel of knowledge has guided my journey, alongside a marvellous group of EXTRAordinary individuals, on this production. My greatest hope is that we have honoured Aidan’s voice and his family’s precious memories as joyously as we can.

Thank you to Aidan and his family, and happy, happy birthday Auckland Theatre Company. May you keep reflecting and connecting our communities for many years to come.

# **Note from the Musical Director**

## Jason Te Mete

In the inaugural production of The Heartbreak Choir, many of the songs performed in the play were personal favourites of Aidan Fennessy and his young family. In the script notes, he writes (of the choir and characters), “their repertoire is broad - classical, contemporary covers, originals, gospels, hymnals, anthems and everything in between”. In a gesture that I think is very generous, the playwright has given permission to future producers to choose songs that work best for their productions. This has allowed us at Auckland Theatre Company to creatively showcase the strengths of our actors/singers.

It can be a fine balance choosing music that is fun and enjoyable to sing, challenges and excites the choir, and is entertaining for the audience as well. With that in mind, we decided to use well-known pop songs and rearrange them for choir to serve the script. It also made sense to stick to the Australian

catalogue of songs which, naturally, adds another layer of authenticity, and, in some cases, humour.

It has been such a joy to work alongside Lara, Keagan and these wonderful actors/singers. Together, we have discovered the beautiful harmony at the core of this bittersweet story.

# Playwright

Aidan Fennessy (1966–2020)

Aidan Fennessy’s work as a writer and director has been produced extensively both in Australia and overseas. His writing credits include The Heartbreak Choir (Melbourne Theatre Company), The Architect (Melbourne Theatre Company), What Rhymes With Cars and Girls (Melbourne Theatre Company), National Interest (MTC and Black Swan State Theatre Company), The Way Things Work (Red Stitch Actor’s Theatre and Tamarama Rock Surfers), The House on The Lake (Black Swan State Theatre Company, Griffin Theatre Company, and

productions in Rome, Athens and Madrid), The Trade (Melbourne International Comedy Festival, Tasmanian Theatre Company), Chilling and Killing My Annabel Lee (Playbox/Chameleon, Queensland Theatre Company). He was nominated at the 2016 Helpmann Awards for Best New Work. He won the 2012 Victorian Premier People’s Choice Award and the 2010 Griffin Award. Aidan was co-founder of Chameleon Theatre, a member of the HotHouse Theatre Directorite, Artistic Director of The Storeroom Theatre Workshop and Associate Director of Melbourne Theatre Company.

# Director

## Lara Macgregor

Lara Macgregor (Ngāti Toa) works as an actor, director, dramaturg and performance coach throughout New Zealand.

She studied acting in New York City with Uta Hagen, Anthony Abeson and Tony Greco, and subsequently worked for 10 years as an actor in the U.S.

She holds a postgraduate diploma in Directing from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney and has directed over 40 productions in the last decade.

In 2009, Lara was appointed Associate Artistic Director at The Court Theatre in Christchurch and, in 2010, went on to become Artistic Director at Fortune Theatre in Dunedin. Directing highlights include Red, In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play), Tribes, Souvenir, The Caretaker, Punk Rock and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.

She currently freelances with multiple companies including: Auckland Theatre Company, Circa Theatre, Centrepoint Theatre, The Actors’ Program, National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art (NASDA) and the University of Otago

Theatre Studies.

Recent acting credits include: Annie Wilkes in Misery (The Court Theatre); Sgt Gillian Carmichael in Clickbait (Netflix); Fran in Things I Know to Be True (The Court / Circa Theatre); Mrs Riordan in One of Us Is Lying (Netflix); and Deborah in the feature film Bad Behaviour, directed by Alice Englert.

Lara is represented by the wonderful team at Gail Cowan Management.

The role of Barbara will be performed by Lara Macgregor on Friday 24 and Saturday 25 February.

# Cast

**Esmay August**Savannah

Esmay August is a multifaceted artist originally from the Kāpiti Coast. Esmay is a graduate of The Actors’ Program and receiver of a Bachelor of Performing Arts (Musical Theatre) from the National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art (NASDA) in 2019.

Screen highlights: short film This is Your Half Hour Call, in which they also

performed three of their original songs within the soundtrack.

Live theatre, television series, musicals, web series, voice artist, backing singer and recording artist have already been packed into their resumé.

Clearly, Esmay is a performer with a boundless future.

## Jodie DordayTotty

Jodie Dorday is a trained dancer and actor with over 30 years’ experience in television, film, theatre and musical theatre.

Theatre highlights: Billy Elliot the Musical, Filthy Business and All My Sons for

Auckland Theatre Company. In 2018, Jodie turned her hand to producing and toured The Book Club by Roger Hall, followed by a critically acclaimed season of Di and Viv and Rose in 2021.

Screen highlights: Shortland Street, Trish in Westside and winning Nokia New Zealand Film’s Best Supporting Actress Award for her work in Anthony McCarten’s Via Satellite.

Jodie is thrilled to be back on the Waterfront Theatre stage and to be part of this uplifting, delightful theatre piece… oh, the joy of singing with friends!

## Kate Louise ElliottMack

Kate Louise Elliott (Rongowhakaata) is a graduate of Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School (Bachelor of Performing Arts). An accomplished theatre actor and director, Kate Louise has spent the last 10 years in various arts management roles, including working as the Artistic Director of Centrepoint Theatre from 2009 to 2012, as the Production Manager, Arts and Culture for Auckland Council and as the General Manager of CubaDupa and NZ Fringe Festival. She is the current General Manager and Artistic Director at Centrepoint Theatre, where she has directed, managed and acted in more than 30 stage productions.

Screen highlights: Shortland Street, in which she played twins, Outrageous Fortune, Whānau and Mataku.

For Auckland Theatre Company, Kate Louise has appeared in A Christmas Carol, Mum’s Choir, Who Wants to be 100? and Who Needs Sleep Anyway?

## Dave FanePeter

Dave Fane is well known to audiences in Aotearoa for his performances on stage and screen.

Screen highlights: Outrageous Fortune, 800 Words, bro’Town, Sione’s Wedding, The Tattooist and Eagle vs Shark.

In 2023, he appears in several international projects, including: returning with

season two of hit HBO Max series Our Flag Means Death; a new Taika Waititi film, Next Goal Wins; and Australian series, The Messenger.

On stage, Dave has been a part of many ground-breaking works including: Fresh off the Boat, Dawn Raids, Where We Once Belonged, The Naked Samoans, The Mountaintop, A Frigate Bird Sings and The Worm. In the 2023 New Year Honours List, he became an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to the performing arts.

## Levi KereamaBeau

Levi Kereama (Ngāti Raukawa) is an actor and artist who has been involved in stage and screen productions for over a decade.

Theatre highlights: in 2016, his first role as a narrator in Tom Sawyer for Auckland Theatre Company; the lead in Silo Theatre’s Medea, directed by Rachel House; appearance in Kōrero Pūrākau, alongside Rawiri Paratene; and the lead role in Auckland Theatre Company’s Astroman, directed by Tainui Tukiwaho.

Screen highlights: The Jaquie Brown Diaries, The Wilds and, most recently, as Logan Driver in Shortland Street.

In 2022, Levi exhibited his paintings in Matariki Tuhono ki te Taiao, a show celebrating Matariki at Depot Artspace.

## Alison QuiganBarbara

Alison Quigan is a professional actor, director, producer and writer with over 45 years of experience. During her career, Alison has acted in and directed over 130 plays, many television productions and radio plays and has written 14 original works.

Theatre highlights: Winding Up, Mum’s Choir and August: Osage County for Auckland Theatre Company; The Dresser, Sherlock Holmes and The Cherry Orchard for The Court Theatre; and Shirley Valentine, The Book Club and Macbeth for Centrepoint Theatre.

Screen highlights: Shortland Street, Sweet Tooth, Mystic, Funny Girls and Ash vs Evil Dead.

Alison was the Artistic Director of Centrepoint Theatre in Palmerston North (1986 – 2004), Performing Arts Manager of the Māngere Arts Centre Ngā Tohu o Uenuku (2013 – 2022), where she supported new work with emerging practitioners, and member of the Auckland Theatre Company Trust Board (2019 – 2022).

In 2001, she was awarded a Queen’s Service Medal for services to theatre.

## Munashe TapfuyaAnesu

Munashe Tapfuya is a theatre and screen actress with a Bachelor of Creative Arts, Major in Acting, from Manukau Institute of Technology.

Theatre highlights: Celie, the lead role in The Colour Purple for Bravi Theatre Company; Respectable Wedding; and The Great American Scream by Albert Belz.

Screen highlights: co-lead on CocaCola commercial, a feature role in Netflix series The New Legends of Monkey and documentary Bittersweet.

Munashe also uses her creativity working in youth development – focusing on refugee and migrant-background youth across Aotearoa.

She enjoys dancing, singing and keeping her competitive spirit alive in social tennis and basketball games when she can.

# Creative

**Jason Te Mete**Musical Director

Jason Te Mete (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) is a freelance actor, singer, dancer, director, pianist and, most recently, playwright/writer.

His performance and musical direction of the 2015 Edinburgh Fringe Festival season of K’Rd Strip, Okareka Dance Company's highly acclaimed devised work, received five-star international reviews. He has performed in Billy Elliot the Musical, the New Zealand premiere of Tuesdays with Morrie opposite George Henare, Anything Goes, La Cage aux Folles and Raymond Hawthorne’s acclaimed production of The Consul (Opera Factory) and many others.

He has directed and/or musically directed over 30 musicals, including: Les Misérables, The Phantom of the Opera, Dreamgirls and The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee (Manukau Performing Arts), which won nine NAPTA Awards, including Best Musical, Best Director and Best Ensemble Cast.

Jason has his own company, Tuatara Collective, and his first play Over My Dead Body: Little Black Bitch was the winner of the 2018 Adam NZ Play Award for

Best Play by a Māori Playwright.

## Sean CoyleProduction Designer

Sean Coyle is a Wellington-based theatre designer and educator. He is a graduate of both Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School and VCA Melbourne, has a master’s degree in art and design from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and a PhD from the University of Tasmania where he also worked as a lecturer within the theatre faculty.

Sean was Head of School at the Pacific Institute of Performing Arts (PIPA) in Auckland for 12 years. From 2018 to 2021, Sean was a lecturer in Scenography at Victoria University of Wellington and, since 2021, has been Head of Design and Performing Arts Management at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School.

Previous designs for Auckland Theatre Company include: The Life of Galileo, Paniora, Wheeler’s Luck, The Shape of Things, The Bellbird, Pollyhood in Mumuland and Sinarella.

## Andrew FurnessSound Designer

Andrew Furness is an Auckland-based sound designer and audio technician with extensive touring experience. Andrew has performed a number of technical roles for Auckland Theatre Company, including Audio Engineer for North by Northwest, touring Audio & Lighting Technician for Winding Up and touring Technical Stage Manager for Still Life with Chickens, which played in 20 venues across three countries.

Andrew’s other sound designs include: Beauty and the Beast, Oliver! And The Wizard of Oz with National Youth Theatre; and A Stab in the Dark alongside John Gibson, for Nightsong. Andrew also has extensive film industry experience, including Netflix’s Sweet Tooth and Power Rangers.

## Phillip DexterLighting Designer

Director of Limeburner Design Ltd, who specialises in theatre and architectural lighting design. Phillip’s training includes a Master of Science degree in light and lighting from UCL, London.

Recent productions include: Polo, The Good Soul of Szechuan and Calendar Girls (Auckland Theatre Company); God of Carnage (Circa Theatre); Lucky Numbers (Fortune Theatre); Long Day’s Journey into Night (The Court Theatre);

At the Wake (Centrepoint Theatre); Lucia di Lammermoor and Turandot (New Zealand Opera).

Phillip’s international work has included designs at Donmar Warehouse, The Globe, Hampstead Theatre, Royal Opera House – Covent Garden, and Opera Conservatory – Royal College of Music.

Product designs include lighting instruments for film and television as well as commercial fittings used for architectural lighting.

## Keagan Carr FranschAssistant Director

Keagan Carr Fransch is a graduate of the University of Waikato (Psychology and Theatre Studies) and Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School (Acting).

Keagan moved to London in 2017 to study for a master’s degree in Acting at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD). Whilst in the UK, she had the opportunity to join the Royal Court Theatre’s Script Panel as a dramaturg, work with Paines Plough as a script submissions reader, review theatre for the Vault Festival, tutor students in short courses at RCSSD, and start an audition coaching business for Black and minority ethnic aspiring actors.

She is currently based in Tāmaki Makaurau working as an actor, director, playwright, and dramaturg. Her recent work includes directing seven methods of killing kylie jenner by Jasmine Lee-Jones for Silo Theatre, and directing Manatees by Dan Goodwin for Auckland Theatre Company's Youth Company 2022.

# AccessibilityPresented by Dentons Kensington Swan

## Audio-Described Performance and Touch TourThe Heartbreak ChoirSunday 26 February 4:00pm

The audio-described performance is open to all and includes a live audio commentary relayed to blind and low-vision patrons in the audience via an

earpiece. Patrons with accessibility tickets can also attend a touch tour 90 minutes before the performance.

## NZSL-Interpreted PerformanceThe Heartbreak ChoirSaturday 25 February 8:00pm

The NZSL-interpreted performance is open to all and features an interpreter

on stage signing the show for Deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons in the audience.

## How to Book

Deaf/hard-of-hearing and blind/low-vision patrons can buy tickets for NZSL-interpreted and audio-described performances for $20. One companion ticket per theatre-goer is also available for $20. Please contact the box office to book accessible performance tickets or if you have any special requirements.

## Wheelchair Access

ASB Waterfront Theatre has eight seats and three wheelchair spaces in the auditorium, reserved for customers with special access requirements. There is step-free level access to all tiers of the building and to seating in the stalls. Wheelchair-accessible toilets are located on the ground floor; accessible parking is available on Madden Street.

## Assistance Dogs

Assistance dogs are welcome at ASB Waterfront Theatre. We can find a seat that’s comfortable for you and your dog or arrange for the theatre staff to look after your dog during the show.

## Hearing Assistance

The theatre has a T-Loop radio frequency system to amplify the sound of the performance. If you don’t use a hearing aid or your hearing aid does not have a T setting, there is a listener unit available on request from the box office.

NZSL Interpreting and Signing — Platform Interpreting NZ

Audio Description — Kevin Keys & Nicola Owen, Audio Described Aotearoa LtdAccessibility Videographer — Rebecca Stringer

Sign up to receive news about the accessibility programme. atc.co.nz/access

**Acknowledgments**

Auckland Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their help with this production:

Auckland Gospel Choir; Auckland Live; Kerry Chamberlain; GALS: Auckland’s Rainbow Choir; Mufrida Hayes; Brian Howard; Jubilation Choir; Kenderdine Electrical; Michelle Lafferty, Ali Nicoll van Leeuwen, and Jess Karamjeet from Elephant Publicity; Vivienne Lingard; Rob Macgregor; Maria Mareroa and Tuatara Collective; Stimmung Choir; Theatrelight New Zealand; The Vocal Collective; Tuatara Collective Choir.

The Heartbreak Choir is supported by: Pilot Productions

# Assistance

If you feel affected by some of the themes in this production, there is help available. We recommend connecting with the following services to access support:

SAFE TO TALK NATIONAL SEXUAL HARM HELPLINE:

call 0800 044 344 or free txt 4334.

Live webchat safetotalk.nz

NEED TO TALK:

free call or text 1737 any time

for support from a trained councillor

LIFELINE:

0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE)

or free text 4357 (HELP)

# Lost and Found(ed)

## A brief history of how an actor was caught up in a drama and ended up running a theatre companyby Simon Prast

I played Willy Loman in a 1979 Auckland Grammar School production of Death of a Salesman (alongside Rima Te Wiata, Finlay Macdonald and Andrew Dickens, to name a few), all I ever wanted to be was an actor. That was my dream. After high school, I went to Law School but, the second I graduated, I auditioned for three drama schools. Only one accepted me: a yearlong programme led by Raymond Hawthorne. It was attached to Theatre Corporate, the hugely respected company he’d established some years earlier.

For two years, I worked at Corporate in back-to-back productions as a ‘jobbing actor’. It was bliss. But then, in 1986, the theatre ran out of money and closed its doors for the last time. It was a painful experience and, as it turned out, somewhat premonitory. Around this time, my big break on TV came along, playing Alistair Redfern on Gloss. During the show’s Christmas break, I was lucky enough to get work at the Mercury Theatre, New Zealand’s largest theatre company and, since 1968, an institution of Auckland’s arts scene. It was a sweet deal to be sure and, for an actor, the best of both worlds. But then, in 1989, Gloss was canned. It was another painful experience and, again, somewhat premonitory.

To my great good fortune, I still had a job at the Mercury and, from late 1989 until 11 March 1992, I once again worked in back-to-back productions as a ‘jobbing actor’. In many ways, this was a golden time; I had the privilege of working alongside arts practitioners who were the best in the business and taught me everything I know. It was heaven.

They say things come in threes. In the early evening of 11 March 1992, five days after my 30th birthday, I was in the downstairs dressing room preparing for an early show of Robert Lord’s Glorious Ruins (!), then playing in the theatre’s intimate upstairs space. I had been doing a double shift, simultaneously playing a doctor in the show on the main stage, The Rose Tattoo by Tennessee Williams, starring Sarah Peirse and Kevin Smith.

Suddenly, a group of men in suits came running down the stairs. Politely but very firmly, they instructed us all to gather up our personal belongings and leave the building immediately. They had done the same to everyone in the theatre, including admin people and those in the onsite workshop and wardrobe department. We streamed out onto France Street, which, with bitter irony, had just been renamed Mercury Lane to boost the theatre’s profile. There must have been 100 of us: actors, administrators, directors, designers, builders, barmen and front-of-house staff. Amongst the human swirl, there were also a goat and a parrot, both of whom had made an appearance in The Rose Tattoo. Now, standing amongst us all, agog and aghast, they seemed like the feed-line to a very, very, very bad joke. A goat and a parrot walked into a theatre; then it closed.

For seven days, the theatre’s future hung in the balance. A decision had to be made. Could the theatre trade its way out of receivership and live to fight another day? Or would this be the end? Could 25 years of experience, expertise and service to the city be snuffed out and flushed away with such ease and brutality? Over the week, we continued to meet in the theatre’s Beresford Street rehearsal rooms. Surely, surely, the powers that be would not let such an arts disaster happen. If there was any optimism, it was misguided. On the seventh day came the word. And that word was ‘liquidation’. To say we were shocked, stunned, numbed and discombobulated would be an understatement. It was the injustice of it all that had struck me like a punch to the gut. In the nearest thing to an Irish wake I’ve ever attended, we got utterly drunk and sang sad songs. It was around this time that Raymond, to whom we had turned as we always had, pointed to me across the crowded room. The words he said next would change my actor’s life: “That man could run a theatre company”.

My God!

We organised that very night. A committee, which I would chair, was elected and tasked with seeing whether or not ‘anything could be done about the situation’. In my righteous anger, I was convinced we could convince whomever we needed to convince that the Mercury could not be allowed to die and that, once those people had heard our sensible and compelling words, the doors would be opened again and life would continue as it had before. Job done; it would soon be hi-diddleydee, back to the boards for me.

Of course, that’s not how things worked out. Very soon, it became apparent that the Mercury was gone forever and there would be no turning back. From this rock-bottom place, the only way was forward and up. Though everyone was sure Auckland needed a new professional theatre company to replace the Mercury, no one was sure about the form that new company would take: the who, what, when, where and why. We had no funding, no track record, no vision, no venue, no structure. What we did have was faith, passion, friends and relatives.

Over the coming weeks, the discussion continued at various locations across the city and a plan emerged. Before we came close to putting on a play, we had to settle on a legal structure. Though a foundation was mooted, what emerged was a charitable trust, which would oversee a limited liability company. The trustees and company directors would be the same people. Now, we needed to find those people. It’s fair to say that the sudden closures of the Mercury and Theatre Corporate and the notorious levelling of His Majesty’s Theatre had made Auckland something of a laughing stock. A joke went around saying that the difference between Auckland and yoghurt was that yoghurt had ‘living culture’. The Mercury’s demise, in particular, had significantly lessened the cachet of sitting on the board of an arts organisation. This new venture came with no guarantee of success, the real possibility of failure and no small risk to reputation. In short, we were looking for heroes. And we found them.

This was Auckland Theatre Company’s founding board: James (Jim) Macaulay as chair, Timothy (Tim) MacAvoy, Judith Tizard MP for Auckland Central, David Stubbs from the Auckland Council and me. Jim was the father-in-law of my dear friend Teresa Sokolich, who had been working as a stage manager

at the Mercury Theatre when the proverbial hit. He was a former chief executive of the National Bank and sat on many boards. Tim was a partner at Kensington Swan, a friend of a brother-in-law of Geoff Snell, who had been a fellow actor that fateful night. At our maximum moment of need, Jim, Tim, Judith and David stepped up to the mark and there can be no doubt that, without their courage and contribution at this time, there would be no Auckland Theatre Company.

As chair, Jim led us safely and steadily through this tumultuous time. He took charge of the paperwork, crossing every T and dotting every I. He found us free

office space in the central city. Seeking sponsorship, I accompanied him to visit old corporate friends. “How much do you need, Jim?” they would ask. “Twenty thousand, please.” “Done,” they would reply without hesitation. Later, in 1995,

when we dipped into the red for the first and only time, Jim opened his chequebook and, right before our eyes, wrote out a $12,000 cheque to cover the shortfall. He gave no second thought to whether or not he would see the money again. I am happy to report his faith paid off and there exists somewhere a photo of me handing him back a cheque for the same amount. I saluted him then and I salute him now, as I do every trustee who followed him. It is impossible to do good work on stage without good governance and, throughout its history, Auckland Theatre Company has been blessed with the best.

As 1992 passed, I became the hub of a wheel of activity rolling slowly but inevitably towards putting on a first play. One day, I had a call from someone saying “Arthur Andersen would like to help out”. Knownothing that I was, I was mildly impressed that some accountant called Arthur wanted to offer his services. Of course, Arthur Andersen turned out to be one of the world’s top five accountancy firms and the commitment it made that day turbocharged our meagre administrative resources. With the assistance of that firm, we acquired the name: AUCKLAND THEATRE COMPANY.

So much had been achieved in a short space of time. But, of course, a theatre company has to put on theatre. What play/s would we do first? Where would we do it and when? To be frank, these decisions were the most terrifying as I had zero programming experience. After much consultation and general dithering, this is what we came up with. Auckland Theatre Company’s first production would be a world premiere of a new New Zealand work, Lovelock’s Dream Run by David Geary. Immediately following was Daughters of Heaven by Michelanne Forster. We sold the two together as the ‘NZ on Stage’ season. The country’s two top directors would be at the helm: Raymond Hawthorne and Colin McColl, respectively.

On 11 March 1993, one year to the day after the Mercury closed, we opened at the Watershed Theatre. John Parker designed our very first set and this was our very first cast: Robert Pollock, Damon Andrews, Hone Kouka, Bruce Hopkins, Michael Mizrahi, Erik Thomson and Patrick Griffiths. Tony Rabbit designed our second set and this was our second cast: Tina Regtien, Rebecca Massey Lee Grant, Raewyn Blade, Ross Duncan, Paul Gittins, John Callen and yours truly. I salute them all and every cast and crew member who has followed in their pioneering footsteps. Their good company along the way made it all a possibility, a pleasure and a privilege.

In 1994, we doubled our output to four plays, adding the Herald Theatre at the Aotea Centre to our venue mix. In 1996, the huge success of Roger Hall’s Market Forces allowed further expansion to the Maidment Theatre on the campus of my Alma Mater, the University of Auckland. Here, we met another hero of the cause, Paul Minifie. Paul was a veteran of Theatre Corporate and

Raymond’s deputy at the Mercury. No one knew more about how to put on a play than Paul did. He became a trusted ally and sounding board, and his support was so extensive it almost amounted to a hidden subsidy. For many years, the Maidment served as our main venue and the artistic expansion it afforded was all thanks to Paul. He is crucial to our story and, as a colleague and treasured friend, I salute him and his staff for their unstinting support and hospitality. Key to Auckland Theatre Company’s success has been its subscription database. Without a venue, the importance of branding the Company and its plays in the mind of the market could not be overstated. Where once Aucklanders could point to a building and say “that is a theatre”, we now had to establish the same ongoing presence with a brochure. To that end, we had help from offshore. Wayne Harrison, at the time artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company, opened his doors, affording unprecedented access to STC’s marketing machine and methods. Later, courtesy of the

British Council, I attended a ground-breaking course on arts marketing in London. The upshot of all of this was our 1998 season brochure, titled

Seven Plays of Passion. Designed by Arch MacDonnell and adorned with

John McDermott’s gorgeous black-and-white photography, it served its purpose well and propelled the Company into its best year yet. If I had to pick a moment when I knew our efforts would not be in vain and the Company would survive no matter what, it would be the publication and reception of this brochure.

There were other developments. In 1998, I directed my first play for the Company: 12 Angry Men by Reginald Rose. To my enormous relief, it took off at the box office, necessitating a transfer from the Maidment to SkyCity Theatre. One year earlier, we had transferred Master Class by Terrence McNally from the Herald Theatre to SkyCity. The cast included the now-famous tenor Simon O’Neill singing an aria live on stage and Elizabeth Hawthorne’s performance as Maria Callas was a show-stopper that had to be seen to

be believed. Indeed, Peter Jackson sat next to me at one performance. If I had to nominate my favourite performances from my time with the Company, I would give the individual award to Elizabeth and the ensemble award to those 12 remarkable men.

By the late 1990s, we were in a position to open the Company to new energies and faces. Here, I salute my good friend Oliver Driver, who brought his considerable talent and vision to a new programme of artistic development we called 2econd Unit.

There were other treats I had the good fortune to experience. In New York, I met with Arthur Miller’s agent, Bridget Aschenberg, who asked if I would like to talk to him. Before I could answer, she had him on the phone and, suddenly, I was talking to the playwright whose words had brought me into the business

in the first place. I stuttered and stammered and asked if Death of a Salesman, which I was about to direct in a production starring Jonathan Hardy and Rima Te Wiata, was autobiographical. He said no and was so polite and patient. To this day, I still have the page of the contract which shows his signature next to mine.

It seemed somehow fitting that my last production for Auckland Theatre Company was The Graduate. Here’s what I wrote in the programme: “To the artists and audiences who have contributed so much, I extend my heartfelt thanks. Together, we have made something very special that will endure. I leave you and Auckland Theatre Company with the lyrics you will hear in tonight’s curtain call:

Sail on Silver Girl

Sail on by

Your time has come to shine

All your dreams are on their way

See how they shine, oh

If you need a friend

I’m sailing right behind.”

Half a lifetime has passed since that first opening night and, 30 years on, as a 60-year-old, I look back on these days with, dare I say it, a grandparental pride. Thanks to a supreme effort, especially by Colin McColl and Lester McGrath, Auckland Theatre Company now has a glittering home on Auckland’s waterfront. That it should stand within metres of where the Watershed once stood is a tribute to that fine space and all the incredible, gravity-defying moments that have since transpired. A city that once closed theatres or pulled them down now celebrates the 30th birthday of its very own company, Auckland Theatre Company, under the leadership of an exciting new director, Jonathan Bielski.

To everyone on both sides of the curtain, to every cast and crew member, to every playwright, director, set, light, costume and sound designer, stage manager, musician and technician, to every trustee, patron and donor, to every sponsor, single-ticket-buyer and subscriber, to Creative New Zealand

and Auckland City, and to my dear Auckland Theatre Company colleagues, who soldiered alongside and put up with me during those early years, especially Teresa Sokolich, Amy Drury, Diana Goulding, Shelley Geenty, Leal Butler, Alison

Reid, Alex Gortchinski and Susanne Ritzenhoff: thank you, thank you, thank you.

Everyone yearns to be a part of something greater than themselves. This was Auckland Theatre Company’s gift to me and I could not be more grateful.

Simon Prast

Dedicated to the memory of Jim Macaulay, Lee Grant, Jonathan Hardy, Dorothy McKegg, Ray Henwood, Ian Watkin, Sophia Hawthorne, Kevin Smith, Nancy Brunning, Willy Plumb, Martyn Sanderson, Graham Mumford, Matthew Brown, my brother Andrew and my parents, Gail and Colin.

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**Created by a group of visionary founding donors in 1998 to support the growth and creativity of Auckland Theatre Company, The Theatre Foundation has underwritten the ambition of making theatre of scale for our city and carried us to the dawn of our fourth decade as we produce our 200th production.**

The Foundation is now renewing its capacity to support the Auckland Theatre

Company for the next 30 years by raising funds to mark the Company’s anniversary.

We invite you to be part of the next era of Auckland Theatre Company’s

history by making a tax-deductible donation to The Theatre Foundation

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# Auckland Theatre Company

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