

# IN ON THE ACT

What does it take to keep an amateur theatre on stage successfully for 50 years? A TV documentary throws the spotlight on the passion and hard work behind the scenes at an Auckland theatre. **BY DENIS WELCH**

Single flames flickered in the dark to begin with. Others joined them, one by one, until their separate glimmerings ran together into a single clear unwavering light.”

No, not a Destiny Church rally but a description of the growth of amateur theatre in this country. It comes from *A Dramatic Appearance*, Peter Harcourt's history of New Zealand theatre from 1920 to 1970, and perhaps Harcourt could be forgiven for getting a trifle carried away.

After all, before the first fully professional theatre was established in 1964, it was the amateurs who kept the thespian torch alight, bringing Shakespeare, Shaw and Sheridan to the nation's memorial halls. Nowadays they tend to occupy a place in society somewhere between bingo nights and badminton clubs, but they're no less active – there are still at least 100 of them – and, as Playmarket administrator Katrina Chandra says, no less enduring.

“It's more of a stalwart thing in New Zealand than you might realise,” she says.

Stalwart would certainly describe the people who have kept the Howick Little Theatre going since 1954. The theatre, which features in an *Artsville* documentary this week, is probably Auckland's most robust amateur company, with a solid reputation for reliability and a subscriber base of 500 underpinning each production.

It started out, says president Laurie Mills, when Howick was just a “hamlet” in the countryside east of Auckland. Imagine that. Under the guidance of Alma Woods, an actress later to become nationally familiar in TV series like *Pukemanu*, a handful of enthusiasts began staging shows, first in the village hall and then, when that was demolished, in various makeshift venues. Countless sausage sizzles later, enough funds had been raised for a purpose-built theatre. Opened in 1974, doubled in size eight years later and given a major make-over in 2002, the premises today would be the envy of any professional company.

The worst of the sausage sizzling may be over. Once, says Mills, they had to raise every cent themselves; now they often get grants from bodies like banks, community trusts and Creative NZ Communities.

So, what's the secret of your success, Laurie?

“We have remarkably consistent audi-



On and off stage in Roger Hall's *Take a Chance on Me*: a reputation for reliability.

ences,” replies Mills. “They do not ever vary more than 200 or 300 for each production. And that's because we have a subscriber base who trust us. We don't dumb down to them, but we don't go out of our way to shock or offend them.”

The programming shows that. Once a year the theatre can usually afford to stage something with a bit of an edge (this year it's the Irish play *The Cripple of Inishmaan*), provided that the other three shows are guaranteed good nights out, ie, comedies and thrillers. The Australian hit comedy *Secret Bridesmaids' Business*, for instance, has just been packing them in; and every second year a Roger Hall play will happily Hoover in the Howickians.

Anyone who's ever been involved in amateur theatre knows, however, that the real guarantors of success are the unseen heroes who beaver away building sets, finding props, sewing costumes and doing the

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myriad tasks required to stage a play. For a core 30 or 40, says Mills, the theatre would be their “primary hobby” – they're the ones there on Sunday mornings as well as Saturday nights – but check out the website ([www.hlt.org.nz](http://www.hlt.org.nz)): there's still plenty to do.

“The important part about any theatre is you've got to be prepared to do anything any time,” says Johnny Bond, 80, who has been with the theatre since 1958, when he emigrated here on the same ship as Roger Hall. “If you're lucky, you get a part – that's the epitome of expectations.”

Yes, there have always been the “I want to be an actor” types who wouldn't deign to wash dishes, and perhaps, admits Mills, the volunteer ethic is not quite as strong as it used to be.

“But I don't think it will ever die,” says Bond, “because it's got such a strong spirit running through it – and with people like Laurie in charge (and I hope he stays there forever) you can't go far wrong.”

ARTSVILLE: PLAYING FOR LOVE, TV1, Saturday, 9.30pm.