WE ARE AMUSED:
THEATRE COMES TO DUNEDIN,
DECEMBER 1861 – APRIL 1862

LISA WARRINGTON

PROLOGUE

By the start of 1862, Dunedin, founded by Scottish Presbyterians as a European settlement in 1848, had become the principal city of the Otago province, and thanks to the discovery of gold in Otago in 1861, was rapidly expanding. Indeed, by 1865, Dunedin would become — for a time — the largest populated city in New Zealand. In 1862, it was a city of impossibly muddy streets,¹ with a full complement of businesses, hotels, pubs, brothels and churches, an active plan to reclaim harbourfront land, and an employment scheme which saw thousands of men paid five shillings each per diem to effect the levelling of Bell Hill in the heart of the city. What it still lacked were suitable and sufficient sources of public amusement. On 15 February 1862, the Otago Witness² noted: ‘The almost absolute lack of places of amusement has … had a prejudicial effect, causing Dunedin to seem a gloomy place, in which there was no fun to be had — even the public houses being all by law obliged to close at 10 o’clock’. Beyond the pubs, and some sporting activities, ‘polite’ entertainments were decidedly lacking; there were few concerts or public lectures, and virtually no theatre, if you discount the solo dramatic readings of Shakespeare’s Othello and The Merchant of Venice, given by Mr J. Nicolson, late of the Deptford Theatre, at Dunedin’s Odd Fellows Hall in August 1855, to which ladies were invited.³

The North Island — and in particular Auckland and Wellington — had been relatively well served by visiting theatre companies and enterprising individuals since as early as 1841.⁴ In Auckland, for example, Harry Jackson, a popular comedian, assumed management of the Theatre Royal in April 1856, working at first in conjunction with, and later in
opposition to, Mr W. H. Foley, who had erected the theatre in March 1856, ‘in deference to the general demand for a commodious building for dramatic representations’. Foley’s American wife was an entrepreneur in her own right, who appears to have separated from her husband c. 1857. She formed a small company – grandly calling it ‘the New Zealand Company’ – with her new leading man, Vernon Webster, and travelled extensively throughout New Zealand, offering a diet of popular melodramas, comedies and farces such as The Lady of Lyons, The Rough Diamond and Kotzebue’s The Stranger. On Boxing Night 1861, the company – consisting of Mrs Foley, Webster and one other actor, John Wilmot – reached Dunedin, significantly offering ‘a series of dramatic performances, the first that ever took place in Otago’. They offered ‘selections’ from Shakespeare, Sheridan Knowles, Bulwer Lytton’s Lady of Lyons, songs and short farces.

Key to this enterprise was the fact that Mrs Foley had arranged to use Dunedin’s Masonic Hall, attached to the Provincial Hotel, courtesy of its proprietor Shadrach Jones. Though much was promised, the performances were essentially drawing-room entertainments played in a back room with few theatrical conveniences. As the Otago Witness recorded: ‘[W]hen we consider the disadvantages under which the performers laboured in the absence of scenic decorations, proper lights, stage, dressing rooms, orchestra, &c., we were astonished at the clever manner in which the pieces were performed’. But within a few days, a plaintive and pointed notice appeared in the Otago Daily Times:

CAN THIS BE POSSIBLE? NO MORE THEATRE!!! Mrs W. H. Foley begs to inform the inhabitants of Dunedin, that in consequence of the Dramatic Entertainments interfering with the Business Arrangements of S. Jones, Esq., they will be discontinued until further notice.

This was followed by an urgent request to anyone who might have suitable premises to let for ‘dramatic purposes’, which was not resolved until mid-January, when the company presented Wooing in Jest and Loving in Earnest (with Mrs Foley as Mrs Witchington) in a room known as the Music Hall, in Princes Street. This space had most recently been occupied by the San Francisco Minstrels, who were then engaged on a ‘long and profitable’ tour of Otago. With their ranks swelled by Miss Melville and Mr Singer, a pianist from Ballarat, the New Zealand Company played until 31 January 1862, offering pieces such as the ‘extravaganza’ of Colin the Youth Who Never Saw a Woman (with Mrs Foley as Colin), the burlesque tragic opera Bombastes Furioso (Mrs Foley as General Bombastes) and standard fare such as The Young Widow, the ‘screaming farce’ Betsy Baker, Planché’s The Loan of a Lover and scenes from Knowles’ The Hunchback. Intriguingly, Mrs Foley also gave a recitation entitled ‘The Seven Ages of Women’ on 25 January.

Although nothing was indicated at the time, local critics clearly saw Mrs Foley’s company as an inferior effort, as the Otago Witness later made plain, referring curtly to
the ‘little theatrical amusement open to such as would venture up a stair into a crowded room to see the performance of a small third-rate company’. Once Mrs Foley departed, the city relapsed into theatrical lethargy. Clearly, a key point was the lack of a suitable designated venue for performances, as highlighted by the *Otago Witness*: ‘Doubtless the want of a theatre will have operated to some extent in deterring theatricals from visiting Dunedin. This want, we presume, will shortly be supplied by the enterprise of some of the spirited Victorian speculators, who have been attracted to these shores.’

**ACT ONE**

Those Victorian speculators were the English-born Fawcett brothers — George, Tom and Sandford, known as Sandy, then based in Melbourne where George had been lessee and/or manager of the Princess’s Theatre since 1859. George Curtis Rowe, known professionally as George Fawcett, predominantly took character parts and ‘drag’ roles and was in his element as a burlesque Medea, or *Aladdin*’s Widow Twankay — which he played for 150 nights — or ugly sister Clorinda in *Cinderella.* Fawcett was also a playwright, adapting a number of works, most famously *David Copperfield*, in which he had much success around the world playing Mr Micawber. Under his management, the Melbourne Princess’s house style was a diet of undemanding, popular plays — comedies, farces, nautical spectacles, sensation drama, burlesques and assorted melodramas. Standards were clearly variable, though Fawcett himself was agreed to be a proficient and popular actor. ‘His style is flighty and unfinished, but not without considerable merit, and he has an inventive ferocity as manager of the theatre which is generally admitted.’

Younger brother Tom Fawcett had mixed experience and ability as an actor, and no management background at that time. He is first noted in Australia in the company of *Camille*, led by Miss Provost, which played at the Melbourne Princess’s, under his brother George’s management, in July 1859, and he ‘made some merriment’ as Creon to George’s Medea in the burlesque *My Dea*, in March 1860. Later that year, Tom joined G. V. Brooke’s company on tour, appearing at Adelaide’s Victoria Theatre, where he was listed, with a casual disregard for the facts, as one of a company selected from ‘the most eminent of the profession in Victoria’. Tom Fawcett’s roles were those commonly assigned to a juvenile lead, though he showed a degree of inconsistency in performance. As Cassio in *Othello*, the *South Australian Advertiser* noted ‘the drunken scene was scarcely well enough worked up’, while he was an ‘excellent’ Banquo in *Macbeth*; as Solinus in *The Comedy of Errors* Tom was ‘very good, but we did not much like the way in which he dressed the part’, and while he played a ‘capital’ Laertes in *Hamlet*, his Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* was ‘a little crude but correct’. From January 1861, Tom was back at the Melbourne Princess’s, playing in a diet of popular melodrama, such as Bouicault’s *The Octoroon* and *Jessie Brown or the Relief of Lucknow*. In person, Tom was
evidently well liked, described as having a ‘bluff frankness which always found its way into the hearts of the pit’. He enjoyed a good joke, and recalled them with ‘laughter bubbling up through his cheery eyes’.  

It seems a reasonable supposition that the Fawcetts saw an opportunity in Dunedin to make some money and to expand their theatrical interests. Perhaps it was also viewed as an opportunity for the two younger brothers to gain valuable experience in managing a theatre. Tom was accordingly dispatched to Dunedin to make initial arrangements, as reported by the *Otago Daily Times* on 17 January 1862.

Mr Tom Fawcett, brother of the lessee of the Princess’s Theatre, Melbourne, is at the present time in Dunedin, having come over as agent for the purpose of erecting a theatre, in connection with that in Melbourne. Instead, however, of waiting for a theatre to be built, Mr Fawcett has come to an arrangement with Messrs Jones, Bird, & Co. for the use of one of their buildings, which it is found can be adapted to the purposes of a theatre. Within a short time, therefore, we may expect, that Dunedin will be enlivened by the performances of a dramatic *troupe* including some of the prime favourites of the Melbourne public.

Specifically, the premises chosen for temporary conversion was Jones’s new Horse Bazaar in Stafford Street. The business generally conducted here was laid out in this advertisement from the *ODT*:

> H. Jones & Co. beg to invite the attention of settlers, country residents, and the public generally, to their new and extensive STABLING (recently erected, regardless of expense), comprising unequalled accommodation for 50 Horses; and trust, by attention to all horses committed to their charge, to merit a share of public patronage. They also beg to call attention to their unrivalled stock of Vehicles of all descriptions, comprising Open and Close Carriages, Buggies, Gigs, and Dog Carts, to let by the hour, day, or week. N.B. Orders for Carriages for Wedding and Picnic Parties attended to. Horses, light and heavy, always for sale.

Even at the time, this seemed a rather unlikely choice, and initially, ‘everyone viewed the proposal with amazement, but as the design is being developed people are becoming convinced that it can be made into a tolerably convenient temporary theatre’. As a venue for entertainment, the horse bazaar had only recently been utilised for Christmas and New Year’s sports, which ‘passed off with great spirit’. The plan agreed by Fawcett and Jones was essentially to have the horse business remain active during the day, while the space was converted each evening for theatrical purposes. These incongruous functions
clearly required a degree of ingenuity and no doubt of compromise on Fawcett’s part. Remember that only two months previously, Mrs Foley’s tenure of the nearby Masonic Hall had abruptly ended when Jones decided that business took precedence over art.

The idea of this construction provided much source of local amusement, with particular focus on the treatment of the horses.

[Will the horses be removed from the premises, or merely shut up in their stables and, if the latter, will they – as compensation for being deprived of their natural rest – be allowed to turn their heads where their tails should be, and see the performance? Or, if the horses are turned out, will their ‘stalls’ be converted into theatre stalls, and the ‘loose boxes’ correspond with the dress circle and, in such a case, will the smell of the stable add a peculiar zest to the performance? Again, will the management adopt the practice of Mr Vincent Crummles, who made Nicholas Nickleby write a special play to introduce two tubs and a pump; and in order to turn to account the magnificent ‘properties’ within their reach, will they announce a farm-yard scene, with real horses, hay, straw, and pitchforks?]

The _Otago Daily Times_ gave a very detailed report of the conversion work undertaken in its 26 February issue. The details make it clear that the building was to resemble the conventional theatre structures of the day as closely as possible, despite the equine obstacles, and allowing for some cost-cutting measures and a recognition of the unusual dual function of the space. The newly built stage was

a well boarded area of 32 feet, by 22, elevated to a level sufficient to bring the performers in full view of the occupants of all parts of the house, while there is ample room obtained for the display of scenery, and depth beneath the boards for those mechanical contrivances which are necessary for transformation scenes, or other aids to stage effect.

The single biggest problem which Fawcett as lessee faced was ensuring that the horse business had sufficient access during the day, and the solution was that the stage and the proscenium were so constructed that ‘about a third of the boarded area can be raised on hinges to the perpendicular during the day, and lowered to the level of the rest of the stage on each occasion of performance’. This rather begs the question of how rehearsals were to be conducted during the day. The orchestra, directly in front of the footlights, was dominated by a grand piano. Audience seating was primarily on one flat level, with stalls – the most expensive seats – able to accommodate three hundred people, boxes, and a pit to house the majority in the cheapest seats. There was also a raised circle, with a full view of the stage. It was estimated that the theatre could accommodate about 1,100 to 1,200
spectators in total. While there was sufficient space for a gallery, potential risk and cost were factors which deterred its construction. The structure included dressing rooms, the manager’s room, and a lamp room. Only after the theatre had opened was it noted that the building was ‘badly adapted for the conveyance of sound’.

Entry points were from adjoining streets — on one side, through the yard of the Provincial Hotel, on Stafford Street, while a more convenient access for the actors and for the patrons of the stalls was provided from High Street. The stabled horses had to be accommodated, and this was done by concealing the inhabitants of the ‘other stalls’ behind decorated canvas screens. The theatre space was further defined by large, portable shutters, which closed off the end of the building next to the Provincial Hotel, while a rough-and-ready roof was made from bare sheets of galvanised iron. Considerable effort was put into decorating the space, with a proscenium arch featuring painted flowers and naked cupids — ‘or whatever they may be intended to represent’ — fake Corinthian columns and concealing draperies and lamps, including ‘two massive chandeliers, each bearing a number of brilliant lights’.

In the absence of gas, which would reach Dunedin later that year, kerosene lamps, amplified by ‘the most powerful reflectors obtainable’ lit the stage from above and as foot-lights. Safety concerns were addressed by providing ‘an ample supply of water, in seven tun butts’ behind the stage should a fire erupt, while in the event of a panic, it was considered consoling that the portable shutters could be instantly removed. In its preview of the space, for which the theatre was especially lit up, the ODT report noted that some sketchy properties were in place on the stage, along with a few backdrop scenes representing drawing-room interiors, and a green baize curtain which would conceal the stage between plays. The principal drop-scene and other painted items were expected to arrive from Melbourne with the actors.

With inventive plans for a theatre building in place, it only remained for Tom and Sandy Fawcett to hire actors in Australia, and to dispatch them to Otago. It would seem, however, that they experienced some initial difficulty in attracting high-calibre artistes — or perhaps they simply took a laissez-faire approach, on the (unwise) assumption that the inhabitants of Dunedin would lack discrimination, and would be grateful for anything they got. They required a company fit to present melodrama and burlesque, as the programme at the new Royal Princess’s was clearly planned to emulate the theatrical diet of its Melbourne sister. Initially, between nine and twelve performers were employed, including John Dunn and his son, John Dunn Jnr, along with Vernon Webster, who had formerly played Dunedin with Mrs Foley. Tom and Sandy Fawcett both took on acting roles, though the latter stayed primarily behind the scenes working as agent, co-lessee and business manager. Several men were drawn from the 1861 Melbourne Princess’s company, including John (Joe) Downey, and Edward Haygarth. Downey had been the Pantaloon in the Christmas pantomime Harlequin, Mrs Hubbard and Puss in Boots, adapted by George
Fawcett, as recently as December 1861. The women were Miss St Clair, Mrs Downey and a young dancer named Ada Hart, with musicians H. C. Downey (violin and piano) and Mr Singer (piano, harmonium and singing), who had evidently remained in Dunedin after the departure of Mrs Foley.

The most promising of the women was Emma St Clair, whose acting career began around 1856, when she played Mary Copp opposite the Charles II of Henry Neil Warner in *Charles II or The Merry Monarch* at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Hobart. It appears that she was particularly adept at light comedy and farce. Two of her most popular roles, in Australia and later in Dunedin, were tomboy Nan in *The Good For Nothing* and Margery in the one-act farce *The Rough Diamond* (aka *The Country Cousin*). In the latter role, the *Bendigo Advertiser* cautiously noted: ‘We are satisfied that by careful study and a judicious curtailment of that exuberance of spirit, which too often mars her performances, this lady will become an ornament to the boards, especially in the line of characters of which Margery is a type’. Margery’s ‘type’ is that of a charming but ill-educated farmer’s daughter, married to a nobleman who took a fancy to her, which he has since regretted, as his plans to educate his bride have failed abysmally. Margery thinks that members of the infantry must be ‘young’uns in arms’, and is very spirited in her views: ‘As for the dancing master, if he dares come here again and make my feet ache as he did yesterday, I’ll break his fiddle over his head for him’. By March 1860, appearing in Bathurst, St Clair was enthusiastically promoted as ‘the most talented … the most versatile … the most charming actress in the Colony’.

Ada Hart’s career also began in 1856, where in July she was listed as a member of the G. V. Brooke company at Our Lyceum Theatre, Sydney. While she sang and sometimes acted, she was primarily a dancer, performing such varied items as a ‘Pas de Fleurs’, a Milanese Hornpipe and ‘La Varsovienne’, the latter with Signor Carandini at Sydney’s Royal Victoria Theatre in June 1857. Initial advertisements in Dunedin grandly — and falsely — listed her as hailing ‘from London’, but this was later amended, becoming ‘from the Victoria Theatre, Sydney’. As it transpired, Hart’s dancing was to be one of the most popular contributions at the Princess’s, where she was singled out in discussion of the first performance, and was ‘twice encored’. While her acting ability was initially limited, the *Otago Witness* later noted approvingly her ‘quite enchanting’ performance in the burlesque *Camaralzaman and Badoura*. ‘This young lady has certainly very much improved since she first came down. She appears to have acquired more confidence and is deservedly a favourite.’

The best known and indisputably the most experienced member of the inaugural Dunedin company was the low comedian John Dunn. Irish born, his early career was in England, where in the mid-1830s he regularly played the character of Jim Crow, ‘the Black Sentinel’, singing the popular song ‘Turn About, Wheel About, Jump Jim Crow’ over 3,000 times, along with ‘Clear the Kitchen’ and ‘Sich a Getting Up Stairs’. He first
perform in America in 1844, and came to Sydney via California in 1856. Dunn was stage manager and one of the principal actors at the newly built Theatre Royal, Hobart, in January 1857, and on its opening night he played what was by now his signature piece, That Rascal Jack, ‘the world-renowned Flummere or Sal Magundi, as performed by Mr John Dunn over 1,000 nights in London; throughout the English provinces, America, California, &c, &c’. Indeed, Dunn had even acquired the nickname of ‘that rascal Jack’ as a consequence of his identification with the material. Describing Dunn as ‘an actor of the genuine “Sam Vale” school’, the Hobart Courier noted that That Rascal Jack ‘abounds with extravagant comicalities, which [Dunn] developed with an extraordinary degree of activity, intermingled with evanescent displays of the broadest humour’. Anecdotes about John Dunn appear in several theatrical reminiscences, such as Memories of an Old Actor by Walter Moore Leman, who recalled him as ‘a buoyant spirit … a careless, reckless, laughing soul’. In addition to his son John, Dunn had two actress daughters, Rosa and Marion, both of whom were to perform in Dunedin in 1863 and beyond.

The spirit of competition, or of cashing in, arose almost immediately. Entrepreneur Shadrach Jones also owned the Commercial Hotel, and ‘with characteristic energy’ converted space for performance with room for an audience of 650 within a few hours, employing a large number of workmen for the task. He brought over from the Victorian mining districts Mr Charles Thatcher and his wife Madame Vitelli to sing in the hotel from 1 March 1862, advertising ‘new local songs written expressly for the occasion’, in a performance intended for an all-male audience. By 6 March, Jones had cheekily renamed the hotel space the Theatre Royal, providing a venue for ‘the true, legitimate’ Mr Thatcher. Stung, Fawcett’s next advertisement on 12 March stated that the Royal Princess Theatre was ‘the only legitimate theatre in Dunedin’. The battle was not easily won: Thatcher was still going strong as an alternative entertainment in mid-April 1862, nightly amusing a crowded audience.

**ACT TWO**

Clearly, the detailed plans for creating a theatre space were not as carefully exercised in preparing and rehearsing for the grand opening of the Royal Princess's. Indeed, this event appears to have been somewhat haphazard, dictated by the tardy arrival of the company from Melbourne. From 12 February to 4 March 1862, almost daily advertisements heralded the ‘imminent arrival’ of the company, with the promise that the theatre would commence operations as soon as they made landfall. There is an interesting urgency to this, suggesting that on the one hand, Fawcett was trying to keep alive the ‘buzz’ for his opening, and perhaps on the other hand that he was anxious to stave off the Thatcher opposition, and retain the kudos of opening the first theatre in the city. Of course, touring companies were well accustomed to playing each venue with little preparation, but given
the very particular nature of this new venue, coupled with the fact that the majority of the company had not previously performed together, it might surely have seemed wiser to allow them at least a day’s rehearsal prior to opening. Perhaps they rehearsed on board ship during their journey, but the end result does not appear to support this. The company had departed from Port Phillip Heads around Tuesday 11 February, but endured a difficult and exceptionally long voyage, with the ship reported to be battling against strong winds when seen off the coast of Port Chalmers on 26 February. To add to the frustration, the bloody-minded Captain refused to pay towing charges required by the harbour steam-tug, thus further delaying the company’s landing until the afternoon of 4 March.

No matter what condition the travel-weary actors found themselves in, they were on arrival locked into the much-vaunted opening night, for which 900 tickets were sold. According to an 1895 reminiscence, the audience was ‘of the most heterogeneous description’, with a significant proportion of ‘stalwart diggers from Melbourne, supplemented by their lucky brethren of the pick and shovel returning with the spoils of the Dunstan and Shotover’. Whether the taint of ‘horse’ was strong that night is not directly recorded. It did not, however, pass without later comment. The Christchurch Press published a letter from a Dunedin correspondent on 28 April, which mentioned the dual function of the theatre/horse bazaar, and noted that ‘those who object to the smell of the stable would be very glad if a regular theatre were to be erected in Dunedin’.

The opening night performance on 5 March comprised two pieces: the ‘Scotch drama’ Cramond Brig, or the Gude Man of Ballangeich, followed by a few dances performed by Miss Ada Hart to great approval, and concluding with Dunn’s signature piece, That Rascal Jack. This short farce bears some surface affinity to Goldoni’s The Servant of Two Masters, with Jack ‘showing his audience how to serve [out] two masters’. It seems like an obvious, easy choice to open the season, surely requiring very little effort on Dunn’s part to get it up to speed. Cramond Brig was perhaps a more surprising choice. As it happens, this was the first time that the piece had been played in New Zealand, but even if the Fawcetts were aware of that fact, it is unlikely to have influenced this choice, and certainly, it was not advertised in that manner. It had never been in the repertoire at the Princess’s in Melbourne, and as far as I can ascertain, none of the Dunedin company had previously played in it. Perhaps there was a whimsical decision to produce something that might appeal to the Scottish Presbyterian element of Dunedin’s population. The enduring popularity of the novels of Sir Walter Scott may also have had some bearing on the matter. One may assume that the play was the version written by William Murray and first performed in Edinburgh in 1828. The plot follows the rescue of King James V of Scotland – disguised as the ‘Gude Man’ of the title – from brigands at Cramond Brig by a local miller named Jock Howieson.

No review of this historic performance was published, out of respect for the difficulty that the company had faced in performing ‘with no time for rehearsal or preparation of
any kind—an though this still begs the question of why the Fawcetts did not delay opening night to permit some kind of rehearsal or familiarisation with the space. However, despite this high-minded claim, the paper could not resist publishing extracts from a highly indignant letter about this ‘theatrical imposition’, signed ‘John Donaldson’, whose name suggests a Scottish origin.

I, with my mates, last night paid a visit to the Princess Theatre. Judge of our disgust in witnessing a fine Scotch piece put on the stage in such a manner, and hearing the Scotch language so fearfully mutilated. Scarce one of the performers knew his or her part; the voice of the prompter being audible constantly. To crown all, Jock Howieson, introduces in this fine old play, the modern hackneyed song of ‘Willie We Have Missed You’, which he sang in such a style as brought down the goose [sic].

Given carte blanche by the bitter tone of this missive, an editorial then noted that, despite kindly refraining from comment on ‘decidedly inferior’ work for two nights, ‘it must be confessed that the performance fell far short of what the public had a right to expect’. What seems more unusual is that That Rascal Jack—which surely by now John Dunn could have played in his sleep—was castigated as having been ‘played in a style which was below mediocrity’. The notice concluded with a warning that ‘the theatrical troupe as a whole is not such as to fill the theatre, and if the management desire to receive the patronage of the public, they must without delay, engage talent of a superior order.’

This was immediately followed by the deliberately barbed, ominous observation that ‘Mr Thatcher’s concerts continue to draw very crowded rooms’.

Nine days later, the newspaper was even more pointed in its comments: ‘So much had been expected of this company, that it was a very considerable disappointment to many to find that instead of being a really good theatrical troupe, they were only a small company of mediocre performers. A splendid house greeted their first appearance but they have not had such large audiences since.’ Fortunately, the Royal Princess began to pick up its game, with the arrival of three seasoned professionals: Miss Kate Corcoran and married couple J. P. (Johnny) Hydes and Miss Harriet Gordon. Hydes was an eccentric comedian, direct competition for John Dunn, while his wife was a first-rate singer, frequently billed as ‘the queen of song’. Their first appearance in Dunedin, on 19 March, was in a programme which featured a farce (A Pleasant Neighbour), a musical burletta (Swiss Swains), a highland fling for Kate Corcoran and, as the principal piece, The Waterman, which featured Harriet Gordon as Tom Tug (with all the original songs). The theatre’s fortunes responded immediately, with good houses to welcome these new arrivals. It was noted that A Pleasant Neighbour ‘was smartly played by the old members of the company, who we may here remark, have greatly improved since they first made their appearance in Dunedin’. This is significant, as it does speak to the likelihood that
extended and arduous travel, rehearsal difficulties, adjustment to the theatre space and perhaps even inexperienced management had played some part in the less-than-stellar initial efforts of the company.

**ENTR’ACTE**

One immediate consequence of the establishment of a professional theatre company in Dunedin was the onset of amateur theatre, with a call for ‘gentlemen desirous of forming a Dramatic Society’. The *ODT* saw a direct cause and effect: ‘The opening of the Theatre appears to have awakened a love of the Drama in the minds of some of the young men of this city … A Club … might be exceedingly useful, as well as amusing, if its members were willing to give their services in aid of public charities.’ An inaugural meeting was held on 10 March 1862 at the Provincial Hotel, which backed on to the Princess Theatre, and led to the foundation of the Dunedin Garrick Club.

The new amateur society would soon forge links with the professionals. The first appointed Hon. Secretary of the club was W. H. (William Henry) Mumford, a young local businessman who would make a runaway marriage in 1864 with one of the leading professional actresses, Julia Matthews. By 1865, Mumford had become the new co-lessee of the Royal Princess Theatre, with his wife as its resident leading lady. The inaugural treasurer was B. L. Farjeon, a reporter for the *Otago Daily Times*, who would later return to England and become a successful novelist, praised by Charles Dickens. Even at this early time in his career, Farjeon was an aspiring writer, creating prologues for special occasions and, in 1864, writing the first of several pieces performed by the professional company: a burlesque entitled *Ye Veritable Legend of the Golden Fleece: Or, the Loves of Jason and Medea*. He began this phase of his career with a special prologue for the Garrick Club’s inaugural production, Bulwer Lytton’s 1840 comedy *Money*. Farjeon’s prologue, in rhyming couplets, patriotic and comical by turns, drew conventional comparisons between the memory of a peaceful, rural, contented Britain and a new land categorised as harsh, wild, savage, uncultured and ignorant, redeemed by the smiling faces present in the theatre:

> Instead of savage forms and rugged scenes,
> I see but pegtops and huge crinolines.

Farjeon also managed a little jest about the building, referring to the audience ‘in box – in pit – and – (not in horse’s) stall’. The amateur performance played to a full and enthusiastic house, and raised about £160 for the selected charity – the Dunedin Benevolent Asylum.
ACT THREE

From this point onwards, theatre became a central feature of the amusements available in Dunedin. The *Lyttleton Times* observed that ‘the Royal Princess’s may now be numbered among the institutions of the place’ alongside Thatcher’s concerts and ‘a German Band, with harp, trombone, and usual accompaniments [which] perambulates the streets, and calls to mind the watering places of the old country’. An *Otago Daily Times* editorial remarked on the change that had come over Dunedin due to ‘the taste for amusements that is making itself apparent’. This new trend was examined under the particular headings of music, drama and horticultural shows, in terms of its harmless nature, as an answer to ‘those who conscientiously object … knowing their scruples to be sincere’.59

Objection was inevitable, and came to a head in August 1862, when former missionary the Rev. Mr Smith, addressing the yearly congregational meeting at Dunedin’s Knox Church, could not resist attacking the temptations provided by ‘that den of iniquity, the theatre … the bottomless pit … through which, he feared, many passed, to the ruin of their souls’.60 Surprisingly few were in sympathy with Smith, however, with ‘Mercutio’, in a letter to the editor, denoting the speech as ‘characterised by more of zeal than good sense or good taste’.61 Indeed, those who supported the theatre included the ‘old residents … who laugh most heartily, enjoy most truly and visit them most frequently’.62

Theatre in Dunedin now went from strength to strength. By mid-July 1862, a second theatre — the Theatre Royal — had been built, opening with a performance of Bulwer’s perennial favourite *The Lady of Lyons*, and featuring ‘a strong corps dramatique, under the management of Mr Le Roy, comprising many well known and talented performers, among whom we may especially mention Mr and Mrs Clarance Holt, and Madame Duret’.63 The Holts, who were established tragedians, arguably brought a higher standard of performance to Dunedin, and leavened light entertainments with Shakespeare and other favourites. By mid-August, the Royal Princess’s theatre had been rebuilt on a more permanent footing, now divorced from the horse bazaar, ‘a change for the better … acknowledged by all who see the really beautiful house that is to be opened tonight’.64

The Fawcett brothers, now joined by the more experienced and popular actor George, continued to operate in Dunedin for a time, and a testimonial presented to Tom Fawcett on 21 July 1862 reflected his contribution to the city.

We … have much pleasure in presenting you with this Testimonial and accompanying Purse of 50 Sovereigns, as a mark of our admiration of your histrionic talent, your gentlemanly behaviour, and the untiring energy you have displayed in establishing the first Theatre in Dunedin, thereby affording an amount of amusement and recreation to the public, hitherto unknown in Otago.65
NOTES

1 Otago Daily Times (ODT) (20 March 1862): ‘Yesterday mud in Dunedin was about as thick “as leaves in Valembrosa”, but not quite so agreeable’. Note: all newspaper quotations in this article are drawn from Papers Past (http://paperspast. natlib.govt.nz), a collection of digitised historic New Zealand newspapers set up by the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington.

2 At this time, Dunedin was served by the Otago Witness, a weekly paper, founded in 1851, and the Otago Daily Times, started by Julius Vogel and William Cutten, the publisher of the Witness, on 15 November 1861. In 2012, the ODT remained the longest running daily newspaper in New Zealand.

3 Otago Witness advertisement (29 September 1855): 2.

4 See Peter Downes, Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand – the First 70 Years (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1975).

5 ‘LIVE AND LET LIVE. W. H. FOLEY begs to announce to the public of Auckland and its vicinity, that he will open the above named place of Amusement On Wednesday, the 7th instant. He desires to have it distinctly understood that he does not do this with any Spirit of Opposition, (as it has been reported;) but from the legitimate desire every man must naturally feel to carry out the motto which heads this advertisement and surely in the present day no one will be so bigoted as to blame a man for doing his best to obtain a living.’ Daily Southern Cross, Issue 923 (2 May 1856): 2.


8 Otago Witness (28 December 1861).

9 ODT (17 January 1862). For further comments on the San Francisco Minstrels, see Downes, Shadows on the Stage 43–4.

10 Otago Witness (15 February 1862): 5.

11 Otago Witness (11 January 1862).

12 Fawcett brought all three of these roles to the Princess Theatre, Dunedin, playing Clorinda in Cinderella on his first appearance on 13 October 1862, Medea on 7 November 1862 and Widow Twankay in Aladdin the Wonderful Scamp on 15 December 1862. He also brought his own adaptation of David Copperfield on 24 November 1862, ‘with splendid new scenery and effects’. ODT (24 November 1862): 3.


16 South Australian Advertiser (20 August 1860): 3.

17 Reviews from the South Australian Advertiser on the following dates: 21 August 1860 (Cassio); 12 September 1860 (Solinus); and from the South Australian Register, 6 September 1860 (Banquo); 14 September 1860 (Laertes); 26 September 1860 (Claudio).


19 ODT (17 January 1862).

20 ODT (28 December 1861).

21 ODT (12 February 1862): 2.

22 Otago Witness (11 January 1862).

23 ODT (6 February 1862): 2.

24 ODT (26 February 1862).

25 On 12 February, the ODT had reported that the new theatre would seat 2,000 persons – a generous over-estimate.

26 ODT (26 April 1862).

27 ODT (26 February 1862).

28 The Dunedin Gas Light and Coke Company prospectus of May 1862 aimed to have the central streets lit by gas by the end of that year. ODT (20 May 1862): 3; ODT (9 June 1862): 2.

29 Haygarth or Haggart, depending on the vagaries of spelling in different issues of the Otago Daily Times.

30 Argus (27 December 1861): 5. Haygarth, Tom Fawcett, Joe Downey and John Dunn all appeared, for example, in the two-act comic piece Used Up in August 1861.


34 ODT (6 March 1862).

35 Otago Witness (12 April 1862).

36 Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser (15 March 1838).


38 Hobart Courier (27 January 1857): 3. Sam Vale was a popular English low comedian who may have been an inspiration for Dickens’ character Sam Weller in The Pickwick Papers.

ODT (15 February 1862).


*Christchurch Press* (3 May 1862): 5.

Labelled as a ‘scotch drama’ in *ODT* advertisements on 5 and 6 March 1862; but the advertisement for a subsequent performance at the Theatre Royal, Dunedin, on 12 September that year was more expansive, describing the piece as ‘the interesting Scottish romance of *Cramond Brig; Or, Days of King James the Fifth*’.


*Cramond Brig* had most recently played in Melbourne at the Theatre Royal in February 1861.

Advertisements in the *Otago Witness* and *Otago Daily Times* from 1852 onwards include notices for the sale of Scott’s novels and poetry, both by auction and from places such as the branch office of the *Otago Daily Times*.

*ODT* (6 March 1862).


*ODT* (8 March 1862).

*Ibid*.

*ODT* (17 March 1862): 5.

*ODT* (20 March 1862).

*ODT* (7 March 1862): 5.


For a very detailed reminiscence of the Matthews–Mumford courtship and marriage, which strongly features Dunedin’s Princess Theatre, see Julia Matthews, ‘A Reminiscence’.


I am currently working on a separate article about the development of the Garrick Club and early amateur theatre in Dunedin, with further reference to Farjeon’s writing for the professional theatre.