NATIONAL YOUTH THEATRE

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

CHANGING LIVES

FROM THE STAGE

CHAIR'S FOREWORD

2025 has been a defining year for National Youth Theatre Trust.

This year saw the organisation take a significant step forward; expanding its reach beyond Auckland while strengthening its financial position and deepening its impact on young people across Aotearoa.

The successful delivery of programmes in Christchurch demonstrated that NYT's model is not only effective, but scalable. At the same time, the Trust returned to a surplus position, reflecting a deliberate and disciplined approach to diversifying funding and strengthening organisational resilience.

What stands out most, however, is the consistency of impact. Across all regions, NYT continues to deliver programmes that build confidence, foster connection, and create meaningful opportunities for young people, many of whom would not otherwise have access to the performing arts.

The Board is proud of the progress made this year and confident in the organisation's direction. As NYT looks ahead to further consolidation and growth, we remain committed to ensuring that access, quality, and sustainability remain at the heart of everything we do.

Melanie Esplin, Chair, National Youth Theatre Trust

CEO REPORT

A year of national expansion and financial turnaround, 2025 was a challenging and rewarding year, and proved what NYT is capable of.

NYT's expansion into Ōtautahi Christchurch was a major milestone. What the organisation discovered there was not just viability, but demand: a community that was welcoming, engaged, and eager for what NYT offers. It confirmed that National Youth Theatre can thrive beyond its Auckland base and that there is a clear pathway to becoming a truly national organisation.

At the same time, the Trust undertook work that stretched it artistically and operationally. Seussical — mounted in June at the Aotea Centre — is an ideal work to challenge the cast and presents a different set of opportunities and outcomes for all age groups, but it can be challenging to sell commercially. These are the moments where the organisation's mission is tested: balancing financial realities with a commitment to transformative experiences. Without the support of our funders - particularly our sponsors Little Umbrella - these performances would not have been possible.

NYT's partnership with BLENNZ stands out as one of the most important programmes the organisation has delivered. It broke new ground, demonstrating that accessibility and artistic excellence are not competing priorities, but mutually reinforcing ones.

Financially, NYT made significant progress. Through a deliberate shift in strategy, the organisation diversified its funding base, increasing support from trusts, foundations, and corporate sponsors. This enabled a return to surplus while continuing to grow.

As NYT looks ahead, its focus is on consolidation: strengthening its foundations so that it can continue to grow sustainably. The organisation is laying the groundwork for Wellington in 2027, investing in infrastructure, and working toward rebuilding reserves so that it can take creative risks and expand access even further.

National Youth Theatre is becoming something larger than a programme. It is a pathway, a community, and a national platform for young people to find their voice.

James Doy MNZM
CEO
National Youth Theatre Trust

OUR IMPACT - 2025

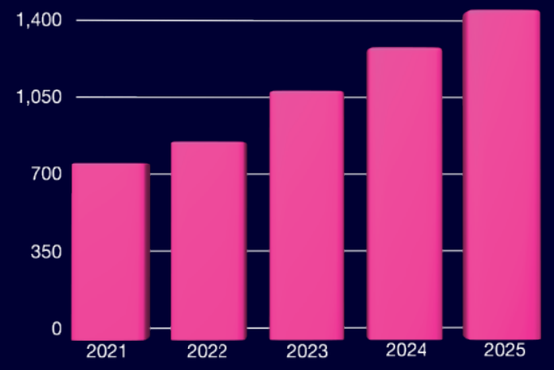
892
young people learned and performed in major venues across the motu

22k
combined schools & public audience

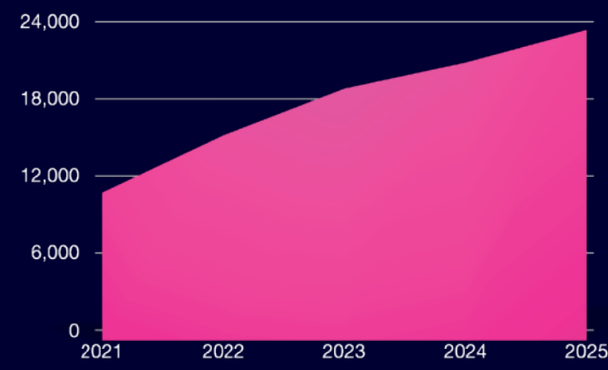
8k
school students experienced live theatre - many for the first time

503
participants in workshops and holiday programmes

Participation growth year by year



Audience growth year by year



But the true impact of NYT's work is best understood through the voices of those involved *.

Confidence & Transformation

"It was P's first time and she absolutely loved it... she seems happier in herself..."

"She's gone from being too shy to absolutely keen to try out for the school play this year... which is an amazing result."

"Our son D x`had a great time - it really helped build his confidence."

Growth & Achievement

"This was by far the best programme for team spirit... and how far you managed to push her."

** All feedback received from our post-programme surveys in 2025*

THE NYT DIFFERENCE

National Youth Theatre occupies a unique position within Aotearoa's performing arts landscape.

National Youth Theatre is New Zealand's only large-scale, open-access musical theatre organisation, providing young people with the opportunity to perform in productions created to professional standards.

While many organisations offer elements of youth theatre, NYT brings together a combination of scale, access, and professional delivery that is not replicated elsewhere.

All-access at scale

All NYT programmes are open entry, with no auditions required. This ensures that participation is not limited by prior experience or confidence, and allows young people the time and space to grow. At the same time, NYT delivers productions involving hundreds of participants, ensuring that access is not achieved at the expense of opportunity or ambition.

Professionally supported productions

Participants rehearse and perform in major theatres including the **Aotea Centre, Due Drop Events Centre, Clarence St Theatre**, and **Isaac Theatre Royal**. Productions are delivered with full technical and creative teams, giving young people the experience of working within a professional environment.

Meaningful roles and opportunities

Through approaches such as triple-casting, NYT ensures that a significantly higher number of participants have the opportunity to perform in substantial roles, rather than being limited to ensemble positions. A cast member will portray their lead role in at least two performances, returning to the chorus for the rest of the shows. This doesn't just increase the opportunities available - it promotes teamwork and collegiality between those sharing a role.

Pathways beyond participation

NYT is not just a programme - it is a pathway. Participants can progress into leadership roles, technical and backstage positions, and paid internships. Many go on to work within the performing arts sector or continue their creative development in other contexts.

National reach and community impact

With programmes now operating across multiple regions- and confirmed expansion to Wellington in 2027 - NYT is building a genuinely national platform for youth theatre. At the same time, targeted initiatives such as scholarships, schools performances, and inclusive programmes ensure that access remains central to delivery.

Together, these elements create an experience that is both inclusive and ambitious, enabling young people not only to take part, but to thrive.

NATIONAL EXPANSION

Ōtautahi Christchurch

One of the most significant achievements of 2025 was the successful delivery of “CATS” at the *Isaac Theatre Royal*, our first full-scale programme in Ōtautahi Christchurch.

This was more than a regional expansion, it was proof that NYT’s model could resonate deeply beyond Auckland. What we discovered was not only strong demand for accessible youth theatre, but a community eager for connection, creativity, and opportunity.

For many participants and whānau, the programme became a transformational experience.

> ***“It is a turning point for K. He used to be very shy in front of people. It helped him build his confidence and he appreciates this experience very much.”***

Confidence and belonging emerged as recurring themes throughout participant feedback.

> ***“Seeing my child build in confidence, meet new people and feel a sense of belonging.” • “My cast member enjoyed finding people ‘just like her’ — making friends etc.”***

Families consistently highlighted the supportive and inclusive culture of the programme, alongside the scale and professionalism of the experience itself.

> ***“Being involved in an amazing musical and being accepted for who she was regardless of any physical inability.” • “She was looked after, cared for, pushed to be the best version of herself and strengthened by those running the programme.”***

For many young people, the opportunity to perform at the Isaac Theatre Royal represented a milestone experience.

> ***“Performing on stage at the ITR in front of thousands of people and making new friends.”***

The programme also enabled participants to explore performance in ways that may not have previously felt accessible.

> “***Being able to have an opportunity to audition for an only singing role and no dancing experience needed.”***

What stood out most strongly was the sense of community formed over the rehearsal and performance process.

> ***“The community feel of the cast. The fantastic leadership of the tutors. Working together as a team.” • “Watching the friendships form over show week.”***

The response from Christchurch confirmed not only the viability of regional delivery, but the importance of continuing to expand access to high-quality youth theatre experiences across Aotearoa.

Manukau

Our performances at the *Due Drop Events Centre* are an important part of their flourishing schools programme. “High School Musical” is always a favourite! This was our third season in Manukau, continuing to increase access to rangitahi from across South Auckland. As always in our Manukau programmes, **over half the places on the programme were fully funded scholarships**, which include free tickets for the families of the cast involved.

> ***“Grateful there were multiple kids selected for the lead roles, to give more opportunities for kids to experience it.”***

Kirikiriroa Hamilton

“Disney’s Frozen Jr” at *Clarence St Theatre* was a family friendly hit. Featuring over 50 young performers from the wider Hamilton area, this, our fourth programme in Kirikiroa, was an important stepping stone towards 2026 and Cats – our first programme at the brand new BNZ Theatre.

> ***“Such a positive experience with friendships made and confidence that grew.”***

EXPANDING ACCESS

Access is central to everything we do.

We are particularly proud of our work with:

- **South Auckland communities**
- **Deaf and blind participants**
- **The neurodiverse**
- **Gender diverse young people**

"Removing finance as a barrier has been HUGE... students have been given a home in the NYT community."

Scholarships – fully funded places in our programmes, including free tickets for family members – are targeted where they're needed most, with over 50% of our Manukau participants being fully funded, and 15% of our Auckland Central programmes.

Schools & Outreach

Our schools programme is one of the most impactful parts of our work. All tickets are either heavily subsidised or fully-funded, and we work to provide transport to fully remove barriers of cost and distance. We follow up with each funded school to offer scholarships to their students, working in partnership to ensure the support goes to those who will most benefit.

"The whole experience was a great success... we now have many inspired students."

"Everything was so easy... the show was fantastic."

These performances don't generate revenue, and are expensive to run – but they are essential.

For many schools, transport is the deciding factor. Without funding support, these experiences simply wouldn't happen.

PATHWAYS TO THE INDUSTRY

NYT is developing the next generation of performing arts professionals.

In 2025 we worked with over 60 participants on our pathways programme, all in paid, mentored positions, ranging from lighting, to sound, to tutors, directors and choreographers.

A standout example from 2025 is **Katie Peacock**, who progressed from student to Head Stage Manager and is now working professionally beyond NYT.

The technical pathway programme is particularly important:

- It addresses post-COVID workforce shortages
- It provides real production experience
- Over 50% female participation

We are promoting this programme in every region where we have a presence. In Auckland, where it is most established, we have around 30 pathways participants working on each programme, developing their skills in a paid, mentored and supported position.

OUR 2025 VENUE PARTNERS

AUCKLAND LIVE

CLARENCE ST THEATRE

due drop Events Centre

ISAAC THEATRE ROYAL

The PumpHouse Theatre

ROSE CENTRE ARTS | COMMUNITY | ECE

TAPAC THE AUCKLAND PERFORMING ARTS CEN

REMOVING BARRIERS

In 2025, National Youth Theatre partnered with BLENNZ (Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ) to deliver a bespoke version of *Wendy*, a programme **designed specifically for blind and low-vision students**, based on our own full length musical, written by James Doy and Jonathan Alver.

What began as a one-week intensive became something far more significant: a powerful demonstration of what is possible when accessibility, inclusion, and artistic ambition come together.

For participants, the programme was more than an introduction to musical theatre, it was an opportunity to step into a space where they felt fully included, supported, and capable of succeeding.

A Pathway to Confidence and Independence

For DM, the impact was immediate and lasting.

The *Wendy* programme provided an environment where she could connect with others who shared her interests, build new skills, and gain confidence in her abilities. That confidence quickly extended beyond the programme itself.

Following the intensive, DM independently enrolled in NYT's mainstream production of The Little Mermaid. She managed every aspect of her participation herself – from signing up and attending rehearsals to organising transport and managing her schedule.

For her whānau, the change was profound.

> ***"As a mum, the impact on her confidence, mental health, and sense of belonging has been huge."***

DM has since continued her journey with NYT, joining additional training programmes and further developing her skills in singing, acting, and dance.

From First Experience to Ongoing Participation

For many BLENNZ students, the Wendy programme was their first exposure to musical theatre.

For IM, it sparked something much bigger. He quickly found himself immersed in a new world—one that challenged him, supported him, and helped him grow.

> ***"It meant a lot to have this opportunity... I was able to work on my fear of public speaking, and I learnt a lot about how a show comes together."***

Following the programme, IM took the step into NYT's large-scale production of *The Wizard of Oz*. While initially overwhelmed by the size and pace of rehearsals, he found support from both peers and staff, enabling him to fully participate.

With each experience, his confidence grew, both socially and artistically.

> ***"I loved coming to all the rehearsals... I made new friends and really enjoyed being part of the show."***

He has since continued his journey with NYT, auditioning again and securing a lead role in "*The Little Mermaid*", supported by tutors who adapted their teaching to ensure he could fully engage.

For his whānau, the transformation has been clear:

> ***"He has really come out of his shell... it has been such a joy to see."***

Inclusion in Practice

The success of the BLENNZ partnership lies not only in participation, but in how participation was enabled.

NYT staff and tutors adapted teaching approaches, provided additional support, and worked closely with participants to ensure they could navigate both rehearsals and performance environments. They used five core cast members from the main OnStage programme as facilitators, working with the BLENNZ students to enable them to succeed, swapping in and out of roles. This experience was invaluable to those students also.

From choreography support to backstage navigation and tailored communication, the programme demonstrated that accessibility does not require lowering expectations – it requires thoughtful design.

> ***"I love how inclusive it is - it makes me feel comfortable and like I truly belong."***

A Model for the Future

The Wendy programme has already had ripple effects beyond the initial cohort.

Participants have continued into mainstream NYT productions and training programmes. Siblings and peers have been inspired to take part. Confidence gained in the rehearsal room has translated into broader life skills, including independence, communication, and resilience.

For NYT, this partnership represents a significant step forward.

It demonstrates that:

- Inclusive practice can be embedded within high-quality artistic delivery
- Accessibility can lead directly to ongoing participation and pathways
- Programmes can create lasting change for participants and their whānau

As NYT continues to expand nationally, the learnings from this collaboration will inform future programmes, ensuring that access remains central to everything we do.

For the young people involved, this wasn't just another programme, it was a gateway to the theatre.

SCALE & IMPACT IN TĀMAKI MAKAURAU

Auckland remains the engine room of NYT's impact.

The scale of our productions in Auckland enables us to more effectively resource our regional programmes, creating transportable packages of reusable designs for set and backdrops, well documented delivery plans, and hundreds of costumes for each show.

Across Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland and Manukau in 2025:

653 young people learned and performed in major venues	**14k** combined schools & public audience	**6.5k** school students experienced live theatre - many for the first time	**20** school holiday programmes & term-based workshops

Our June 2025 production of *The Wizard of Oz* at the Aotea Centre exemplified both the scale and ambition of NYT's work.

- **320** cast members
- **6,000** audience members, including 2,600 school students
- **130** lead roles through triple casting
- **30+** crew members, many participating through NYT's pathways programme
- **Over 100** volunteers working backstage through the week
- **2 accessible performances**, sign-language interpreted and audio described

The professional support required was huge:

- **36** wireless microphones
- **Over 1,000** costumes
- **140m²** of digital scenery

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

National Youth Theatre operates a highly effective blended funding model, with approximately **70% of income** generated through programme fees, ticket sales, and other earned revenue.

This approach enables NYT to deliver large-scale impact while maintaining a relatively low level of subsidy per participant and audience member, maximising the value of every dollar invested.

2025 marked a significant financial improvement:

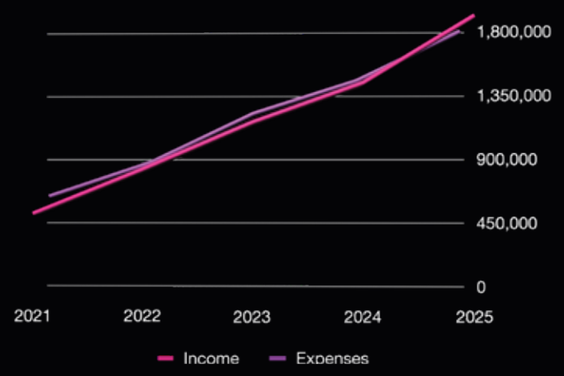
- **Revenue increased** to $1.78 million
- The Trust returned to a **$37,792 surplus**

This was driven by:

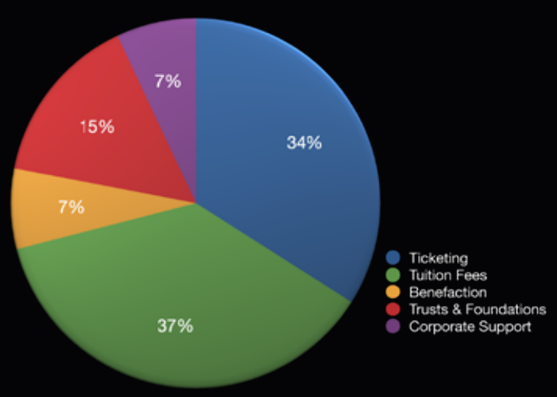
- Increased funding from trusts and foundations
- Growth in corporate sponsorship
- A deliberate diversification strategy

Challenges remain:

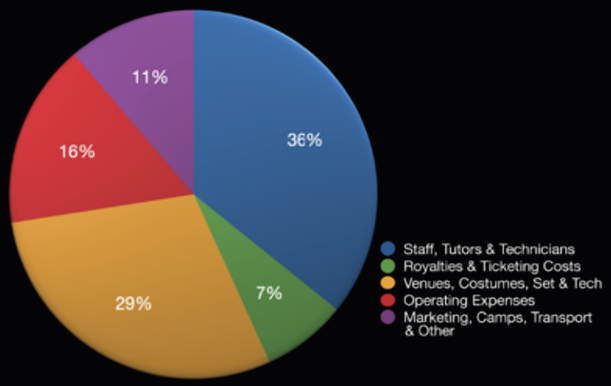
- Cashflow continues to be a key risk
- Rebuilding reserves is a priority



INCOME



EXPENDITURE



LOOKING AHEAD

Our priorities for the coming years are:

- Consolidation before further expansion
- Growth in Ōtautahi Christchurch
- Preparing for Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington 2027
- Investing in infrastructure
- Rebuilding financial reserves

With stronger foundations, we will be able to:

- Take creative risks
- Expand access
- Deliver more ambitious work

OUR 2030 VISION

National Youth Theatre's inspiring, nation-wide programmes will offer over 2,500 opportunities annually for young people to achieve their potential both on and off the stage. We will bring the joy of youth theatre to over 35,000 audience members each year.

OUR PEOPLE

NYT Board 2025

Melanie Esplin (Chair)

(she/her)
Director of Development at the Auckland Philharmonia.

Dianne Ruela

(she/her)
Marketing Communications Specialist.

Kelly Bleakley

(she/her)
Sr Manager, Social Purpose at Lotto NZ.

Maria Stegantova FCCA

(she/her)
Principal, Technical Accounting at IAG

Rebekkah Schoonbeek-Berridge

(she/her) (Ngāti Maru)
Performer/Choreographer

Paul Smith

(he/him)
Programme Manager
Sky City Entertainment

Sarah Somerville

(she/her)
Executive Director of TAPAC

Simone Corballis

(she/her)
Youth Representative

Dari Kotlarsky

(she/her)
Youth Representative

Milly Malpas

(she/her)
Youth Representative

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Seamus Ford

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Dr Andrew Zhu

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Partnerships
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Tamara Azizian

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Office Manager
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With experienced professionals in key positions, we are able offer emerging artists pathways to a career in the arts. Paid internships lead into mentored development positions, allowing them to graduate to the wider theatrical community, or providing them with a strong base to pursue further training or branch into a related industry. Many of our previous staff have gone on to work in theatre, television, education, journalism, PR, or even to found their own theatrical endeavours.

Our tutors place great emphasis on encouraging each and every cast member to build their self-confidence, striving to be the best that they can be. They are encouraged to push boundaries and to achieve their full potential through developing a new appreciation and enthusiasm for musical theatre. We create a supportive environment where young performers can be themselves, where they are encouraged by their peers to stand up and stand out, celebrating individuality.

OUR SUPPORTERS

PATRONS

Guy Haddleton
Carl Doy ONZM

GRANTS

Operating Support

Foundation North
Freemasons Foundation
Lottery Grants Board
Tindall Foundation

Tāmaki Makaurau & Manukau Programme Support

Becroft Foundation
BlueSky
Dragon Community Trust
Four Winds
Manurewa Local Board
Pelorus Trust
Pub Charity
Trusts Community Foundation

Kirikiriroa Programme Support

WelEnergy Trust

Ōtautahi Programme Support

Aotearoa Gaming Trust
Kiwi Gaming
New Zealand Community Trust
Youthtown Trust

BENEFACTORS

Producers Circle

Anonymous x 3
Anne O'Brien & Jonathan Alver
Bin Luo
Chris & Jackie Reeve
Colleen & Barry Simpson
Colleen Luo
David Hollander
Jean Yu
Jie Yu
John and Liz Marks
Riverside Trust
Romance Luo
NZ Funds

Principal

Anonymous x 13
Carla Bickel
Downtown Rotary
Ian & Geraldine Atkinson
Melanie Esplin

Ensemble

Graham Wall
Helen McCondach
Ian Johnson
Jess Win
Maria Stegantova
Marty Bergin
Maureen & John Dawson
Nat Milne
Peter & Anthea Springford
Ruth Middleton
The Gordon Family
The Kotlarsky-Oshri Family
Theresa & Paul Corballis
Tingting Zhang

SPONSORS

Little Umbrella®

MONSTAVISION

"I can look back on the relationships and skills I obtained throughout those years and see the direct link to the success I have now achieved."

"NYT is a community where everyone is welcome, from awkward to outgoing."

"It was my 'happy place' – where I could wholly be myself in a fun, positive and supportive environment."

"NYT allowed me a space to do what I loved, to sing and dance and perform to audiences; where that was encouraged, not something to be judged for, and to be surrounded by people who were like me.."

"I credit my live performance and public speaking ability to my time spent training with NYT. "

"NYT is not just a theatre company, it's a family"

NATIONAL YOUTH THEATRE

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SCAN ME