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Two time Academy Award winner made her start at the Union House Theatre.

Why is (London) Union House (Bridge) Theatre (falling) closing down?

Why should creative types lose out to a problem that is facing everyone? Is it fair that the increasingly problematic issue of student housing underpinning Australian Universities

If you know Union House, then you'd know the theatre. Union House Theatre that is, the birthplace of Cate Blanchett and Barry Humphries. In 2015 alone, the theatre was home to thirty student theatre productions, ten of which were Australian works, seven original works and 14,627 audience members. It is the home of such theatre companies as UMMTA, FLW and NUDE.

Yet the University of Melbourne has announced plans to demolish Union House when the lease ends in 2018; whilst the future existence of the Food Co-op, Rowden White

Library and various other student spaces are yet to be revealed, North Court and Union House Theatre are going.

The theatre is the largest belonging to the University of Melbourne — including the VCA and the Conservatorium. It is an enviable space, as valuable to the theatre community as an oval for footballers — and Melbourne University certainly has more than one of those.

Therefore, it begs the question as to why the University has made this decision. The University is ostensibly the ‘best in Australia’ — yet, by demolishing the theatre, the University is essentially demolishing the figurative symbol of the performing arts at the Parkville campus.

Jordan Peters, 19, a second year arts student at the University of Melbourne is in the midst of his yearlong tenure as Artistic Director of the University of Melbourne Music Theatre Association. Peters considers the pending demolition to “be a massive blow to the student community”, opining that “theatre brings countless students together, fostering friendships and giving people invaluable skills”. Indeed, the Union House Theatre is not just home to actors, singers and dancers. The building caters to aspiring technicians, lighting operators, set and costume designers, and even young playwrights. Last year, the theatre was home to ‘Mudfest’; what was then the largest student arts festival in Australia, which debuted original plays and musical theatre productions written, composed, directed and performed by students.

Peters argues that the pending closure of the Union Theatre is only the tip of the iceberg in the University’s attitude towards theatre. “Getting rid of the theatre facilities without a comparable substitute would be emblematic of the neglect the uni student theatre experiences already”. As opposed to the Lincoln Square Fitness Centre — the Beaurepaire Centre & Pool complex recently underwent a \$5.4 million redevelopment — the rehearsal facilities presented to student theatre associations ranges between rooms usually used for large tutorials, and meetings.

The current rehearsal spaces are “run down and hard to access” according to Peters. Further complicating matters has been the lease of the 757 building — where UMMTA’s Semester One production of *Urinetown* was devised, blocked and rehearsed — to the VCA for the rest of the year. The 757 building, level four, dance space was the best facility available to student theatre on the Parkville campus.

The decision of the University to demolish the Union Building has come as a scathing reminder to individuals as Peters, who opines that it is proof of the University's preoccupation with financial remuneration over creative freedom — "If theatre facilities are scrapped in favour of presumably revenue raising accommodation, it would be part of a trend of the uni prioritising commerce over quality of student experience" argues Peters.

Solidarity Online opines that the existing lot will be replaced by a "new precinct" with "house health and counseling services, bookshop, and a pared-down Student Centre (with many services moved online or to a phone service)". Whilst it is certain that there will be no theatre, further cuts are expected, at least according to the November 2014 information supplied by the university — the last time UMSU was given any communication.

The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) is the official student organisation of the university, with current President Tyson Holloway-Clarke highlighting that it is not just the Union Theatre facing demolition, but the smaller Guild Theatre is also bound for destruction. "Losing both the Guild and Union House Theatre (UHT) would strike a massive blow to student arts and culture...our theatres host over 30 shows a year and have hundreds of external bookings that are trying to share our stages", argues Holloway-Clarke, who reasons that more information should become available in coming months.

Holloway-Clarke does however understand and appreciate the housing problem facing the University, admitting "the demand for housing is through the roof and thousands of students are locked out of living close to the university simply because of the lack of available spaces". However, regardless of the issue of affordability for students, Holloway-Clarke argues that the creation of the accommodation at the expense of the theatre would be alleviating one problem by creating another. "Finding a solution to one problem while creating another is not sustainable or wise" says the student union president, "we will not abandon these programs or these facilities as we know how important they are to our community and our identity as an organisation".

Solidarity Online is just one in a number of online forums chronicling the pending Union House closure. The University of Melbourne Student Union facebook page welcomes online discussion and discourse, and is available for enquiries into the future of the Union House. For the time being however, there is little to no online forum petitioning specifically to highlight the pending loss of both the Union House and Guild

Theatre. If the sentiments of Jordan Peters and Tyson Holloway-Clarke indeed reflect the attitudes of the greater student body, a forum or platform in which to discuss impending changes would certainly be welcomed.

Nevertheless, the endeavours undertaken by the University are certainly emblematic of an attitude that values currency over student experience.

By James Lowther

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Theatre

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