

Downstage Theatre Society Inc

21 September 2000

SOUND ACCESS AT DOWNSTAGE

People with hearing impairment can now enjoy a full sound experience at Downstage Theatre, following the installation of a high-tech hearing loop. And those who have tested it are thrilled with the results.

The Downstage Theatre Society Inc has raised funds to ensure the Theatre is fully accessible by the community. "We have been concerned for some time that many people have difficulty following dialogue, despite wearing hearing aids," said Ms Rachel Underwood, Society President. "The new loop system is something we have wanted for a long time, but until recently, we have been unable to find a technology suitable for a theatre that changes its configuration for different productions."

Ms Underwood said that the Lic Audio XL-500 hearing loop emits an electromagnetic signal that is detected by the telecoil in a hearing aid. The signal is then processed back into sound waves enabling the wearer of the aid to hear.

Typical challenges for people with hearing aids include being seated at a distance too far from the actors, reverberation leading to blurry sound, and background noise that can drown out sounds from in front.

"We tested the system on Saturday and those using a hearing aid are totally enthusiastic. We know that people who use hearing aids often stop going to the theatre because of the difficulties they face. We're absolutely delighted to bring the magic of theatre back to this group within the Wellington community," said Ms Underwood. "Now all that's required to enjoy totally clear sound is to turn to the 'T' setting on each hearing aid."

Downstage has been assisted by Oticon NZ Ltd, a leading manufacturer of hearing aids and communication systems for the hearing impaired. "Oticon assisted us to identify a loop installer who could meet the challenges posed by the Theatre," said Ms Underwood. "Oticon is also assisting us to publicise the hearing loop service, and have provided brochures and posters to alert hearing aid users to the loop's existence. We're also grateful to Oticon for sponsoring staff training so that we can assist theatregoers using the system," she said.

Ms Sharon Matthews of the Costume Cave who is profoundly deaf has tested the new loop and is very impressed by the sound clarity. "The sound used to bounce off the walls and my hearing aids picked up background noise. Most theatres are so bad that I sometimes require interpretation or have to rely on lip reading the actors. Now I can focus on the whole production - it's fantastic," she said.

"It's a real step forward to create a disabled-friendly theatre and I'm just amazed and very grateful that Downstage has done this - why don't other theatres?" said Ms Matthews. One additional benefit is that theatregoers can now sit anywhere in the theatre and hear perfectly she said.

The loop is part of wider moves by the Theatre and the building owners, Hannah Playhouse Trust Board, to improve access for people with disabilities. Comfortable lift access is at the drawing stages with the engineer commissioned by the Hannah Playhouse Trust, the building's owners.

The Downstage Theatre Society Inc is responsible for the election of a management committee and the Downstage Trust Board and raises funds for the Theatre.

ENDS

Note: Journalists and photographers are welcome to visit the theatre to inspect the system and speak with Sharon. Contact Nicky to arrange. A graphic used to denote the presence of a hearing loop is also available to illustrate any news items.

CONTACT

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