

Dear PLOC members,

Firstly sorry it has taken so long to write, I have been flat out with work and haven't had much time to catch my breath and reflect, however you're never far from my thoughts.

I have had an extremely busy year and its not over yet.

But I thought Id write a few words to let you know what I have been up to.

Well two and half weeks ago I graduated from Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School with a Degree in the Performing Arts. It's been a full on three years and I have not only gained a range of skills and experiences but have developed a strong sense of myself and the direction I'm heading in. I must confess that I am somewhat apprehensive as I leave the safety net of school and start the tumultuous career path of the actor.

However over the last year or so I have begun to integrate into the Wellington arts scene and have a good support network around me. Since leaving school I have worked in my first NZ feature film and am currently in creation of two shows aimed at the festival circuits next year.

One of the highlights of my final year was travelling to France on what is referred to as a secondment. It is a fantastic opportunity to travel abroad to work with overseas companies and to create networks further a field. With the support of old friends such as the Pukekohe Light Opera Club, Franklin Creative Arts and other means, I managed to fundraise enough to spend just over 5 weeks in Europe.

My adventure began a little rocky as the companies with which I was to be working were somewhat allusive, and the French being French in their ability to confirm anything left me a little unsure if things would indeed eventuate when I arrived. So after initial contact, then a period of not hearing anything back from the companies and having already booked my flights, I decide to head over and try my luck.

So I arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport minus my luggage – thank you to Auckland customs – jet lagged and speaking bugged all French. Found my way into the heart of Monmartre and camped out at a backpackers. Luckily a few days later my luggage did arrive and I could change my somewhat smelly clothes.

I spent the first few days with a company called Comedie du Picardie – and offshoot of a National theatre Company - theatre de la Jacquerie. All the performers had trained under the legendary teacher Jacque LeCoq and had been working together for many years. The director of the project Juliet O'Brien happened to be a kiwi so this helped, and a New Zealand composer had also been brought over to design the score for the play – suffice to say NZ had a strong presence. I set about working as an assistant in different areas from helping with the rehearsals to set building and creating props. This ability to be able to work with my hands became a huge currency, it felt great to be able to offer something practical and it meant I was never caught short of something to do. To this of course I owe to my time working with the Saturday morning crew in Pukekohe – I did you proud guys. I also managed to score free digs through the Generosity of the company's artistic director. It was a one-bedroom studio apartment in the heart of the African quarter – nice to have my own space and to be out of the backpackers

I was then offered a place on the first week and half of tour and I headed up north to the region of Picardie to the small town of Villejuif, which was to be their first stop. The idea was to tour the play to all the towns in the region and to take theatre to the communities who normally couldn't get to the city – very romantic!

It was a very intimate work environment and I had the opportunity to soak up the company atmosphere and their unique style of physical theatre. We worked long days from about 8am to 10.30pm in rehearsal and shared dinner at this tiny French restaurant, which became our hangout. The landscape was brilliant and the red wine superb so I was happy man.

On the one or two days off I travelled back to Paris (about an 1hr and half away) to see some sites and soak up more of the atmosphere. Some of the highlights for me were the Musee du Picasso – I adore his work - and the Cathedrals such as Notre Dame and the Sacre Coeur, the nightlife in Monmarte wasn't bad either.

Having been with the company for two weeks I decided to try and make contact with Theatre du Soleil. I had, back in NZ, written to them asking if I could come and observe them in creation, being told that this would most likely not be possible due to their reputation for secrecy. But I did get a reply of “Why not” from the company's founding director Ariane Mnouchkine – that was all I heard back, but on the basis of this I thought I'd turn up and see what would happen.

Theatre du Soleil, led by Ariane Mnouchkine, is a company that has been going for over 40 years and has been a strong influence in many aspects of twentieth century drama. The work is very physically engaging and draws on styles such as Commedia dell'Arte, Grotowski, and Eastern Theatre traditions as inspiration. The company itself is situated in the Bois de Vincennes (a national park just out of Paris) in an old munitions factory – ‘the Cartoucherie’, and has roughly 40 actors, plus around the same amount in support staff.

Anyway I found my way to the theatre and spoke with Madame Mnouchkine, explained my story and spent the next two weeks involved in different aspects of company life. At the time they were in the process of shooting a film of their current production *La denier Caravanserail*. The production has toured all around the world, its based on the real life stories of refugees escaping countries in the middle east – including the story of the refugees of the Tampa, they were refused entry into Australia and after waiting weeks off the shore of Australia were later accepted into New Zealand. Many of the support staff and actors we're refugees themselves - this is a testament to the political stance that the company takes when immersed in work of this kind.

Unlike the common trend of fast turn around commercial theatre in New Zealand, Theatre du Soleil spends months in creation. This time allowed for in creation makes for a greater depth within the work - it is original, provocative and moving. I was invited to stay at the theatre itself, I was housed in the ‘lodge’ a dojo type space set up for people to sleep, and so it was I found myself sleeping at the theatre and eating, living and working with the company.

The actors themselves lived in Paris and would travel to work everyday, this made the theatre empty at night and apart from myself, the make up artist and the security guard

were the only ones around. The space was very still and seemed to exude a magical quality, a very special and creative place.

I was also able to get a free ticket to Julius Caesar at the National Theatre directed by Deborah Warner and starring Ralph Fiennes.

After spending just over two weeks with the company I headed over to London by means of the Chunnel and spent four days in England. During that time I visited the Globe and watched a performance of Pericles, one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays, which I had recently performed in a few months earlier. As well as the Globe I visited the Tate Modern and spent a couple of days in Cambridge visiting the Universities.

The trip was a great success and of huge value, one that I am appreciating on many different levels. I have since become much clearer in terms of the work I want to create, the possibilities, depth and impact theatre can have on an audience, its value as an art form and just how lucky I am to be doing something I love. It revealed to me just how important companies and in a larger sense communities are in bringing around change. Everything starts at the grass roots level, indeed the best work comes from that, work created from friendship and the shared passion for this thing we call theatre.

It was a fantastic experience one which I am still reeling from.

To the Pukekohe Light Opera Club, and the Franklin Arts and Cultural Trust a huge thank you to all for your continued support and love that have made the last three years and my time at Toi Whakaari an invaluable experience.

I will hopefully be home for a few days in the New Year before I head back to Wellington to continue work. I hope that during that time I can see as many of you as possible. I will be back up in Auckland at the start of next year so I will have more time to catch up then

Once again, much thanks, much love and Merry Christmas

Regards  
Aaron