



TRAVEL

FEB 11, 2017

Santiago, Chile

The Melbourne Festival artistic director visits Santiago to scout for performances at a time when truths and freedoms are being upturned across the world.



JONATHAN HOLLOWAY



La Diana, Santiago, Chile

Nea Poirot

I am sat in 40-degree sunshine in the cafe of the main cultural centre of Santiago, Chile. Just 20 hours ago I was in pre-inauguration New York – snowbound, woe-drowned New York.

I'm here looking for acts for the Melbourne Festival: theatre, circus, dance, music.

I'm also in the middle of the longest birthday of my life. "It's the time differences," I say to my glass of *carménère*.

This is my first time in Chile, and sitting in the courtyard of GAM – Centro

Cultural Gabriela Mistral – watching groups of young people doing self-organised dance classes to all types of music, I am genuinely excited.

Heading across town to see a showcase performance, I notice a “*pare*” sign for the first time.

I am told Chile is one of a handful of places in the world that doesn’t use the international “stop” sign, favouring the Spanish and Portuguese word instead. I later learn that the “handful of places” includes all Arabic-speaking countries, almost all of South and Central America, China, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand and North and South Korea.

The performance piece was by a company from Argentina and started beautifully.

A slow series of still photographic images were projected, into which performers moved “found surfaces”: a box, a piece of polystyrene, a white-clad body, smoke.

The result was that the whole images were revealed like a contemporary dance jigsaw puzzle, or the tunnel at the beginning of a Bond film. This gave incredible movement, perspective, and the ability to pull out one detail in front of the others, until the whole image was united on the screen at the back of the stage.

Through these static images a hand-held projector showed film of people, moving through the spaces, and small scenes created by the first projector.

Above all this, a third projector carried surtitles for the Spanish dialogue.

It was the surtitle projector that failed first. The performers continued, but many of the professionals didn't really comprehend anymore. We did, though, understand the intent of the technician in the black T-shirt walking around the edges of the stage with a remote above his head.

When the second projector failed, we all became more aware of the heat in the room, and it confirmed something I've often suspected: projectors that have a "no signal" screen displaying the make of the projector are 10 minutes more reliable than those with a picture of Australian finches.

The third projector stopped working quietly, without fanfare or logo.

As the company finished and we applauded, I wondered why they hadn't just paused partway through, acknowledged the issues, fixed them and then continued.

Was it denial? Was it a belief that if they stopped they would have failed? Was there no single person with the authority to say "*pare*"? Also, when all the technical elements have failed and the audience is politely clapping, should the performers still raise their arms and point to share the applause with the deeply depressed technicians?

The next day, the people and streets of Santiago are bathed in sunshine and optimism, but there is always the shadow of Pinochet in the corners. The Pinochet regime between 1973 and 1988 was responsible for the murder of thousands of dissenting Chileans, with another 80,000 interned and tens of thousands tortured. The far-right politics and neoliberal economics were the testing ground for the Chicago School's economic theories that have been implemented by right-leaning governments around the world in the past two decades, and have changed global politics and wealth distribution beyond recognition.

I travelled to Teatro UC for another projector-dependent theatre piece, this time about Chilean guerillas trained under Pinochet and now still working underground to change society with violence. Halfway through, a performer stepped forward and said they had

technology issues so they would pause and fix them. After a couple of minutes, the company started quietly singing the most beautiful Chilean revolutionary songs.

I was reminded of Brecht's comment, "In the dark times, will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times." Thankfully, they fixed the equipment before someone started juggling.

The confidence to say "stop", to fix the issue – which took just a bit longer than is comfortable, as always – made me full of admiration for the company and their honesty.

The following night I am sitting with artists and presenters in La Diana, possibly the most fabulous bar I've ever seen, built a year ago by a local artist out of window frames and plants, with rope bridges and metal spiral staircase, held together by twine, cable ties and the hopes and dreams of risk assessors.

The conversation again turns to the United States presidential inauguration in Washington. At last, a subject that unites us all, a table full of the world's most optimistic and well-travelled bleeding-heart liberals. People from five continents, all of whom have read the same five news and opinion sources, all of whom are daunted by the genuine complexity and potential global and social horrors ahead.

The conversation ends quietly when a septuagenarian Chilean artist, who repeatedly risked his life secretly making political work under the Pinochet regime, shakes his head, and tells the Americans that he just can't imagine what it will be like for them to live under a man as terrible and vengeful as Donald Trump.

The following day, a Friday, I read the world news under a cloudless South American sky. The inauguration in Washington shares top headline with the

horror on Bourke Street in Melbourne. Throughout the morning friends and colleagues search me out to say how sorry they are, how much they love Melbourne. I call my daughters, who are staying with their grandparents in Europe, to tell them what happened and how much I love them.

Today I feel deeply impotent in the face of both the random violence in Melbourne and the entirely planned desecration, in the US, of the truth and freedoms in which I believe.

I have two jobs: to raise my children with an understanding of the importance of honesty, respect, inclusion and hard work, and to devise festivals that make the world more understanding, stronger, smarter, happier. Today both of those things feel as if they have become significantly more difficult.

On Saturday I sit in Bar Radicales with festival directors from South America, the US and Korea. We talk about their

experiences of the differences between the three or four big Australian festival cities, and my observations about moving from Britain to Perth six years ago, and then to Melbourne two years ago.

As always, some topics recur. The weather. The night-time economy. The ability to get around without a car. Sport, culture and food. Coffee. Always coffee.

Other differences are more subtle. The approach to community and inclusion. The appetite for disagreement and tribe-forming. The experience and place of Indigenous people. The tension and proximity between where we work, rest and play, and the manner in which that influences the architecture and city planning.

Interestingly, I found the differences between one Australian coast and the other greater than the differences between England and Western Australia.

On my last evening in South America I see the work that I will bring to Melbourne next year, a performance about the experience of the Mapuche, with an indigenous cast and creative team. It is the thing I was hoping for, the show that will help define my 2018 festival, the one that makes this whole trip worthwhile. Sometimes the world cuts these things very fine. Other times, datelines being what they are, you spend 46 hours getting a year older.

On the way to the airport we pass the cultural centre again, and there are the groups of young people learning their dances, lost in their reflections in the glass of the cafe, seemingly oblivious of the horrors of the past or the realities of the present.

My friend tells me that the cultural centre and the courtyard are built on the exact spot where Pinochet's headquarters were, where terrible atrocities were commanded less than 20

years ago. ●

TAGS:

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Chile

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La Diana

Bar Radicales

Teatro UC

Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral

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JONATHAN HOLLOWAY

is the artistic director of the Melbourne Festival.

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