

# FULL THROTTLE

WORDS Michal McKay

PHOTOS Courtesy of Harcourts Hawke's Bay Arts Festival

PHOTO: Charlotte Anderson, taken at Black Barn, Havelock North



Pitsch Leiser, festival director and Andy Heast, chairman of Arts Inc. Heretaunga pause to share a joke while on ride round Black Barn





The Famous Spiegel tent, 2015

As the Harcourts Hawke's Bay Arts Festival speeds towards its fifth anniversary, we talk to the two visionaries who made it happen.

**A**ndy Heast and Pitsch Leiser are both 'petrolheads'. It's a shared passion which may appear an unlikely platform for the huge success that is the Harcourts Hawke's Bay Arts Festival, but dig a little deeper and this mutual love of a dangerous sport reveals a pairing of minds. For, as chair and festival director at Arts Inc. Heretaunga, the qualities big-bike riding requires (courage not being the least of them) manifest themselves into those demanded of the two visionaries who believed in the importance of bringing performance arts to Hawke's Bay.

At a time when performing arts critics had become increasingly despondent about the longevity of such art forms, it took even more grit. Many believed they would become obsolete thanks to TV's ever-increasing pull and the incredible rise of the internet. 'Unfashionable' was a word often repeated. Fortunately, despite such prophecies of doom, the performing arts are not diminishing but are in fact continuing to attract new talent and expertise.

**Much of this has to do with the importance of self-expression – in theatre, dance, music, and the many other indicators of performance arts.**

For anyone suffering from a sense of inadequacy, shyness, or introversion, the self-knowledge and understanding which develops from self-expression (in a positive form) helps teach society about itself and can be a tool to bring awareness of current conditions.

Performing arts originated, they say, in the 6th century BCE in Greece, through such poets as Sophocles, who wrote plays and dance as a means of comedic entertainment. The Dark Ages put a bit of a dampener on that but during the 15th century CE they were revived in Italy, and spreading throughout Europe, with the improvisation of music, dance and costume. 'The Bard' of course made a huge contribution to the cause. So even if the naysayers believe otherwise, the pull of performance is powerful. For one, it is a universal language. It makes the world a better place. It drives us forward and gives a sense of power, because it inspires. Since ancient times art, in its many forms, has been shaping humanity; and today, with its status of entertainment, gives fuel to one of the most profitable industries.

So, when the Spiegel tent came to the Havelock North Village Green in 2015 and caused a rumble, particularly amongst performance arts cognoscenti, credit should be dealt out in dollops to these two for their foresight. Speed dial to 2019 and those rumbles are now a roar. A



roar which has reverberated across the country and beyond to summon audiences from disparate age groups, but like minds, who have heard the bugle call that the Harcourts Hawke's Bay Arts Festival is something very special.

Strongly supported by the board of Arts Inc. Heretaunga, whose vocation is to advocate for the arts community in the region, the surprise, delight and diversity of the festival has rapidly become one of the most important calendar events in the region.

The fact that it has been a success from the start, each year gaining a wider reach with its innovative programming, rests firmly on Pitsch and Andy's shoulders, and their intransigent belief that it would work. But they are also very swift to share that feat with their support team which, they point out, has been "devoted, worked long, hard hours way beyond the call of duty. And always pretty-well up for just about anything."

**A few facts about 2018: Total audience was almost 25,000, with 45 productions and 64 performances; 56 volunteers who filled over 300 shifts and gave over 1000 hours; nine New Zealand premieres and nine local productions; 37 companies from ten countries; 23 sponsors and supports; and 54 patrons and donors. For a region with a population of approximately 166,000, that is definitely way beyond expectations.**

Pitsch and Andy met over their motorcycles. Introduced by a friend, their enthusiasm for putting their feet down on the pedals of a high-powered bike soon revved up a friendship developed out of an equally diverse range of interests, one of them being the arts. But what cemented this strong bond was an event which was caused by the very thing that brought about their meeting.

While riding up the wild reaches of the Taihape Road, Andy had an accident. Pitsch was ahead and, realising very quickly that his mate was missing, he flew back to a catastrophic scene. Andy had come off, pitched onto the middle of the road and his bike had bounced back on top of him. Most of his body was broken – one arm left intact.

Pitsch called the helicopter and, as Andy puts it: "That saved my life." Any lesser man may have given in to what he terms "a bit of an adventure", but by that stage they had a festival coming up in just six months.







Andy and his wife, Annie, first came to New Zealand in 1997 for a motorcycle tour of the South Island. And they found their spiritual home. Born outside Oxford in the UK, he laughs when he says his introduction to the arts was a late discovery.

“I was in retail. Joined what ultimately became the Debenhams Store Group and loved it. I had come out of school not knowing what to do and I found a career path by accident.” Working his way up the ladder into senior management, he developed his speciality into brand management. As anyone who has been involved in retail knows, it is pure theatre (remember the show Mr Selfridge?). So it’s perhaps not a surprise that he discovered a latent love of the arts.

He and Annie came to Hawke’s Bay to live in 2000 when she was offered the role as chief operations officer (COO) at Hawke’s Bay Hospital. “It was a no-brainer. We went to lunch at East Pier and saw a pod of orca. Wouldn’t you?” he smiles. They emigrated with the cats. Andy became involved with Creative Napier, joining the board.

**“I got into festivals – Wine Country Winter Arts Festival with the Creative Napier team and Paula Black. But it was hard with no council support and little money. We managed to put together a couple of festivals, but what we needed was a big attraction.”**

**Like the Spiegeltent.**

Three years later Annie was enticed by a chief executive role in the UK, and back they went. “It took eight years before she had an epiphany on the Spanish Camino and announced she wanted to return,” Andy comments. Both at that stage were free agents as consultants. “We looked in Nelson, but old friends invited us back to the Bay; we stepped off the plane and that was it.” Shortly after meeting Pitsch, Andy was persuaded to go on the board of Arts Inc. “Cynthia Bowers was chair. Then she resigned and I took over, and Cynthia remained to support us as treasurer.” At about the same time, Pitsch – who had been taken on as the part-time community arts development manager – came to him and said he could get the Spiegeltent. “I said – ‘let’s do it’.”

In February 2015, they presented to the board. “The board said, ‘go for it’,” laughs Andy. “Of course, they didn’t for one minute think it would happen! But the Opera House had been shut for maintenance, so we knew we could use that operational funding. In March, the council said ‘yes’ they would back us. It was really truly amazing.” Enter the accident.



T-B: Songs for the Fallen, 2016; Back of the Bus, 2017; Sunny Ray and the Magnificent Moon, 2017; Vincent, 2017





Festival identities, Jamie Macphail, and Sarah and Robert Mellor in front of the famous Spiegel tent, 2015

“It meant Pitsch was on his own, raising support and devising the programme.” Despite the odds, Andy got out of hospital in three weeks to convalesce and help as best he could. “There was so much to do, people were putting up roadblocks and we presented a paper to council about why we needed to do it; all of the challenges just made us more determined. It was an extraordinary journey and we received extraordinary support. So rewarding.”

**Enter the other half of the equation: Pitsch Leiser. A man of uncommon talent and remarkable credentials. Born in Switzerland to a Dutch mother and Swiss father, he acknowledges his upbringing was ‘very cosmopolitan’.**

“Our home was always full of visitors from other parts.” His father was an artist and his mother a talented ceramicist. “My grandfather was a stockbroker in the 1920s with a big art collection, with which we were imbued. My brother is an artist too, but I knew I was never going to be. I had more of the entrepreneurial spirit.”

He travelled to India, China, Nepal, South East Asia, Indonesia, returned and worked as a chef at a top jazz club, and later worked at Zurich’s alternative art and cultural centre, Rote Fabrik, where international live concerts and performance art with such luminaries as Nirvana, Jimmy Cliff and Laurie Anderson, and Spanish performance artist Las Fura Del Baus starred.

He came to New Zealand in 1988 and worked with Alan Green and Matthias Sudholter, running dance parties and underground live performances.

Two years at Galatos, then the Galaxy Theatre in the Old Customhouse in Auckland, followed. They produced work to create a platform for the performing arts, featuring a diverse range of multi-disciplinary art forms including contemporary dance with Lemi Ponifasio (MAU), Touch Compass and others; theatre with Cliff Curtis, the late Kevin Smith, and Teresa Woodham (now also living in Havelock North) were all part of his entourage. “I also had a day job with the Auckland City Council, creating Music in Parks,” which he started in 1993. “Then I studied at The University of Auckland’s Business School part time doing a post grad in arts admin and business management.” The Pasifika Festival of 1997 and 1998 followed, along with a move to Wellington to run Capital E.

Then Australia. “Canberra initiated working with artsACT, and managing ArtSound FM, a community radio station.” Pitsch’s CV would fill an entire feature in itself. Suffice to say he continued his upwardly mobile path in the world of performing arts, including teaching at AUT in Auckland, working with the City Councils in Auckland and Wellington; became a stay-at-home dad when son Tobias was born; then moved into Internal Affairs as a regional advisor for the Office of Ethnic Communities. Later he worked in Cairns helping to resettle Bhutanese refugees before returning to Wellington to work for Charities Services.





T-B: Mixtape Dance Show, 2017; George and Noriko, 2018;  
Pacific Crystal Palace, 2016



## Top Tips for Starting an Art Collection

By Kaye McGarva

Starting an art collection can be daunting, but don't be intimidated. Everyone can buy and enjoy art whatever the budget. A lot of it comes down to commonsense, trusting your instinct, taking your time and doing your research. Like most things: you get out of it what you put in, and while the process might be challenging, it is also fun and enriching.

My top tip is to buy art based on emotion rather than investment potential, because nothing is certain. If you love a piece of art and it matches your curtains, that's great, but don't buy art just because it does. When choosing art, it's important to look for authenticity. While copies and prints are fine in your student days, when starting an art collection look for original art or limited edition prints signed by the artist.

A great place to define your taste is Instagram. You can follow artists whose work you like and follow their hashtags to a whole new world. Expect your taste to change over time. You may find the most difficult-to-like works are the ones you end up loving the most. Buy slowly.

Art fairs tend to have well priced art, but they can be overwhelming. Do your research first and don't give in to a fear of missing out. If you can't secure the work on show, chances are the artist can do a similar one for you, get their card.

If you are looking for advice, we can help guide you through the process. We have a curated online catalogue of art as well as the sizable collection of art in our gallery. We take care of everything from sourcing artwork, transporting it to your place in our custom fitted van, providing a professional hanging service and advising on finance options.

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“Whatever I have been doing, I have always loved and had passion for,” Pitsch comments. When the opportunity to work part time with Arts Inc. came up, he embraced it with enthusiasm.

**“The closure of the Hastings Opera House plus an opportunity to bring an original 1920s Spiegeltent to Hawke’s Bay in partnership with the Taranaki Arts Festival were unique opportunities to start our own, which was what every other region has. A naïve belief?” He smiles.**

“Like Topsy, it has grown,” says Pitsch. “The first year was a real struggle; organisationally, we were a bit on the back foot. But given the green light and enough funding to get it going, it was a great success. Each year we try to get a bit more ahead, the gestation period is a year, if not longer, so annually we are generating income to match our programming ambitions. This will hopefully be made easier once we get into our long-term plans with local and central government funding. The community has really got on board with sponsors, patrons, volunteers – everyone working for long hours and a lot of love.”

Pitsch is the first to say that his connection with Andy made the difference. “An equal partner with energy, passion and enthusiasm – and a non-conformist. But there is a huge trust and belief there. We both may have vision, but there is a bunch of stunningly talented people working with us who have made it happen. Like Kelie Jensen, Dan Betty, Rachel Chapman, Max Parkes, Marita McCormick-Duncan and Lyn Mackie from the Hastings Community Arts Centre.

“The festival has created great opportunities for our local talent too. Puti Lancaster’s *The Contours of Heaven* has just been invited to go to New York’s SoHo Playhouse. It was also the catalyst for Creative New Zealand to support her work with a substantial grant enabling a whole cast and crew to develop new work. The



T–B: Behind the Lines, 2018; Pacific Crystal Palace, 2017;  
Trash Text Dummies, 2016





The Famous Spiegeltent, 2015

festival also provides an opportunity to connect with the broader community, council, producers, other creators plus a national and international network of multiple agents and companies.

“Each festival has its own personality and it is essential to gauge the global mood to ensure we get the balance right,” Pitsch explains. “Primarily, people want to be entertained. Challenged too. But when the rest of the world is falling apart, sometimes challenge needs to be equated with a softer, gentler mix. Getting that mix perfect is the all-important question. And of course, there are the practical aspects: the staging requirements, logistics, budgets, how many performances etc. There is a lot of guesswork.”

**What they have done over the five years is work towards a sustainable arts festival. “Now it is possible to employ a few people all year round, enabling us to further develop the team,” Pitsch continues.**

“We can’t afford not to push the boundaries, but audiences still want to have a good night out. This year is a milestone. The Spiegeltent is a new one – bigger, but still retaining its intimacy. Next year we will be focusing more on the Hastings Arts Precinct and include the Opera House as one of our core venues. It will bring a whole new context. Working out the relationship between the two primary areas and how to grow the platform will be very interesting. The great thing is it will bring an opportunity to generate a diverse range of acts with a wider reach.

“The real outcome that gives us both so much satisfaction is connecting communities,” says Pitsch. “People hear stories they may not have necessarily heard before. Ones

that create an insight into other people’s lives. You have to take a risk. Open an audience’s mind. After five years it is expected, but how to build new audiences and cultivate the festival for the future is paramount. It’s also about building opportunities for artists and makers and teams for work development.”

There are so many layers to consider. But the economic stimulus to the region is palpable. And that is “thanks to corporate supporters, sponsors and patrons who open themselves and their pockets to enable new awareness,” Pitsch continues. “The patrons have an altruistic perspective, because they well understand the importance of the arts to our wellbeing. And how important a role the arts play in helping us get through difficult times by upliftment and self-expression. It all helps create a common platform. Gives us something to be proud of and value as part of our identity. We would be a poorer place without the arts.”

As Andy endorses: “It’s that sense of ownership – that this festival is OURS. Sport can be divisive but performance art is totally inclusive.”

The strong relationship between arts and cultural engagement and educational attainment is why the Harcourts Hawke’s Bay Arts Festival has resonated within the region. The value of performing arts is fundamental – it has a symbiotic relationship with education and economic power.

And a holistic case for us to support our own.

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**For more information about the Harcourts Hawke’s Bay Arts Festival go to [www.hbaf.co.nz](http://www.hbaf.co.nz)  
Dates are October 15–28, 2019.**