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A Canterbury tale *of rebirth*

Giant puppets will take over the city centre on Labour weekend. Charlie Gates reports on how an experimental theatre company has found itself at the heart of efforts to regenerate post-earthquake Christchurch.

A Christchurch theatre company is leading extraordinary change in the city centre.

Free Theatre Christchurch has thrived on the periphery since its formation in 1979, but the transformed city has become a perfect place for the company's experimental and improvised approach.

Long-standing members of Free Theatre are behind exciting city centre projects like the Festival of Transitional Architecture (Festa), Gap Filler and Life in Vacant Spaces.

Festa attracted an estimated 20,000 people to the city centre last year with a temporary city of light created by architecture students from across the city. The usually desolate and deserted city centre thronged with people, light and life for just one night.

The second Festa will take place this Labour weekend and will include Free Theatre's largest contribution to reinvigorating the devastated city centre.

Free Theatre is leading Festa's main event this year with a procession of six giant puppets through the city centre. Canterbury Tales is a two-and-a-half-hour procession that will activate different events across the city, from a performance by the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra in Cathedral Square to sound installations by Pacific Underground and local artists. The festival will also feature temporary cinemas, bars and art installations.

The puppets are something to behold. Some are more than 12 metres high and require a team of people to operate them. They are based on characters from Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th century work *The Canterbury Tales*, with puppets modelled after the friar, the merchant and the knight. The scholar is particularly impressive, with fully-articulated wooden hands and an animated face.

Free Theatre project coordinator George Parker, who helped inspire Festa last year, believes his company has prospered in post-quake Christchurch.

"By the nature of Christchurch being quite a conservative city, a lot of our projects were on the periphery. They sell out and get good reviews, but a lot of the time the company is seen as 'studenty'," he says.

"All eyes are on Christchurch at the moment in terms of the arts and if there is new potential and new ideas coming through. I think Free Theatre is at the centre of a new culture coming in. It is a chance to showcase what we have always done. Christchurch is a very experimental place now."

Parker says the Canterbury Tales procession is on a much larger scale than previous Free Theatre productions.

"It is definitely on

a different scale, just in terms of the number of people involved. We are opening it up to the whole community. The current situation has allowed for us to create a project of this scale that would not have been possible beforehand.

"We have had ideas in the past to do something like this, but it has always been a challenge."

Free Theatre was formed in 1979 and adopted its name in 1980. A four-page manifesto written in 1982 calls for an "experimental and alternative theatre" for Christchurch and outlines an opening season of "anti-conventional Dada pieces".

In the 1980s, Free Theatre won a court case against the Arts Centre fighting eviction from their basement performance space in the historic complex.

Along with the Arts Centre venue, the company would stage

shows at the Old Queen's Theatre in Hereford St and the University Theatre. All their venues are now either out of bounds or demolished.

From the outset, Free Theatre was interested in using performance art to forge change and challenge the status quo.

Canterbury Tales is no different.

Parker said the "carnavalesque" procession was designed to influence the Christchurch rebuild.

"Canterbury Tales is really engaging with a sense of place. We want to get into a conversation with the city," he says.

"It is about these rituals around which people come together; eating, drinking and telling stories. You have the people and then you build the buildings around them. This is

getting out into the streets and bringing the people back into the city with rituals that bring them together."

"Our audience is also developers. How will [developer Antony] Gough create alternative spaces where there is diversity and life, so it is not just bar after bar?"

"We are all in this rush to get the city rebuilt, but maybe it is worth taking some time. The risk of rushing is you build what was there before. We want to define what it means to be in this place and that comes from the people."

He wants Canterbury Tales to be a new form of carnival that allows for change.

"There is a notion that festivals allow people to let off steam. The social order is turned on its head, but it is a very conservative act because the

social order is then restored. Since the 1960s people have been searching for a different form of carnival where the outcome is unknown," he says.

"Carnival is seen as restoring a conservative world view, but we see it as a chance to create something new and different and unique."

Festa director Jessica Halliday also believes the weekend event can be a form of activism, pointing to transitional and temporary projects that have already influenced the Christchurch rebuild. A Gap Filler project in Lyttelton was incorporated into a regeneration masterplan for the area, while timber arches installed on the former Crowne Plaza site, extending Victoria St's diagonal route into the city centre, have been echoed in government rebuild plans.

"This event is speaking to bigger issues," she says. "We are trying to bring ideas into the conversation about the rebuild of the city. We hope that people come into the city over the weekend repeatedly and engage with a whole range of events and the whole city comes to Canterbury Tales."

When a procession of giant puppets leads a crowd of people through Christchurch city centre over Labour weekend, it will be a fun carnival, but also the culmination of years of work and a moment in the spotlight for a Christchurch institution.

THE DETAILS:

Canterbury Tales is part of the Festival of Transitional Architecture, Festa 2013: A city-within-a-city for Labour weekend, October 25-28. See festa.org.nz

Walking tall: Giant puppets from *The Friar's Tale*, designed by Chris Reddington of Free Theatre, will form part of a procession for Canterbury Tales during Festa 2013.

Photo: KIRK HARGREAVES/FAIRFAX NZ

