

GO ARTS

Free fall

As a CV entry, this would take some beating: "I did a number of banquets for the international surrealist conference."

The speaker is Richard Gough, professor of theatre and performance in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at Aberystwyth University, Wales. As a Canterbury University Visiting Fellow, Gough is in town until the end of October, collaborating with the Free Theatre of Christchurch. One of his areas of study is the place where food and performance overlap. Hence the surrealist suppers – and a conference in the 1990s titled "Performance, Food and Cookery". With Gough involved, the Free Theatre is incorporating food in its next production. The theatre's regular Arts Centre venue is off limits, so *The Earthquake in Chile* will open at St Mary's Anglican Church in Addington on October 13.

Originally, *The Earthquake in Chile* was a novella by German writer Heinrich von Kleist, written at the end of the 18th century. In the story, a young man is preparing to hang himself in prison in Santiago, Chile, in 1647, after the shame of an illicit relationship with a young woman he was tutoring. The young woman, now a nun, is scheduled to be executed. But the 1647 Santiago earthquake – a real event – changes everything. Starting with this text, Gough, Free Theatre founder and artistic director Peter Falkenberg and celebrity chef and Free Theatre collaborator Richard Till have been devising a show – with tapas included – that promises to be more about Christchurch in 2011 than Santiago in 1647.

Falkenberg has been impressed by the idea that the post-quake environment saw a suspension of Christchurch's usual hierarchies and social structures. In the play, the audience, guided by Gough and fed by Till, will get to experience that post-quake sense of community once again. But can we maintain that state or will we drift back to the old structures? "We see the earthquake in Christchurch as a way to break through the monoculture that seems to have existed here," Falkenberg says. There will also be a place for audience members to share their stories – which sounds like that dreaded thing, audience participation. "But they're not exposed," Gough says, "and this is where food works. It's going to be very intimate, personal."

The church setting means it will be set to Mass music, from the medieval to more recent composers, such as Arvo Part. "It will be a feast for all the senses," Falkenberg says, expecting "music lovers as well as people who like food". As well as those who like daring theatre.

Falkenberg's comment about Christchurch's "monoculture" is a reminder of the Free Theatre's enduring role – to be an experimental alternative to established theatre and, thus, to be critical of social norms. Falkenberg, who is German, founded the group in 1979. It became an incorporated society in 1982 and built its own theatre within the Arts Centre. Writers and performers such as Bill Direen, Stuart McKenzie and Roy Montgomery worked with it in those

days. "We worked ourselves to death, to make productions that were experimental and we didn't know if audiences would come or not," Falkenberg says.

"I did up to six productions a year at one time. If two or three of them became financially viable, we could pay our rent again."

Actors were often provided by government employment schemes. Years later, the Free Theatre came under the control of the University of Canterbury and the university's Department of Theatre and Film Studies grew out of it. In other words, rather than a university department starting up a performance group for research purposes, the Free Theatre turned its performance history into a university's body of knowledge.

Gough listens to Falkenberg's account of Free Theatre's history and notes similarities and differences. Like Falkenberg, Gough and his colleagues were inspired by European free theatre of the 1960s. As teenagers, they formed the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre. But unlike Christchurch's version, it had access to European audiences via an established festival circuit.

Initially the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre had nothing to do with a university.

But eventually it was "made an offer it could not refuse" and moved west to Aberystwyth, a small university town of around 20,000 people – roughly half of whom were students. As Falkenberg has also found, it is not easy to balance institutional requirements with experimentation. "The maverick aspect of being a free theatre has had to be negotiated," Gough says. But in other ways, it is easy to stay on the margins. Geographically, in Gough's case: "We're on the edge of Europe. Go any further and you fall into the sea."

Falkenberg knows how that feels. "Here, we work in isolation," he says.

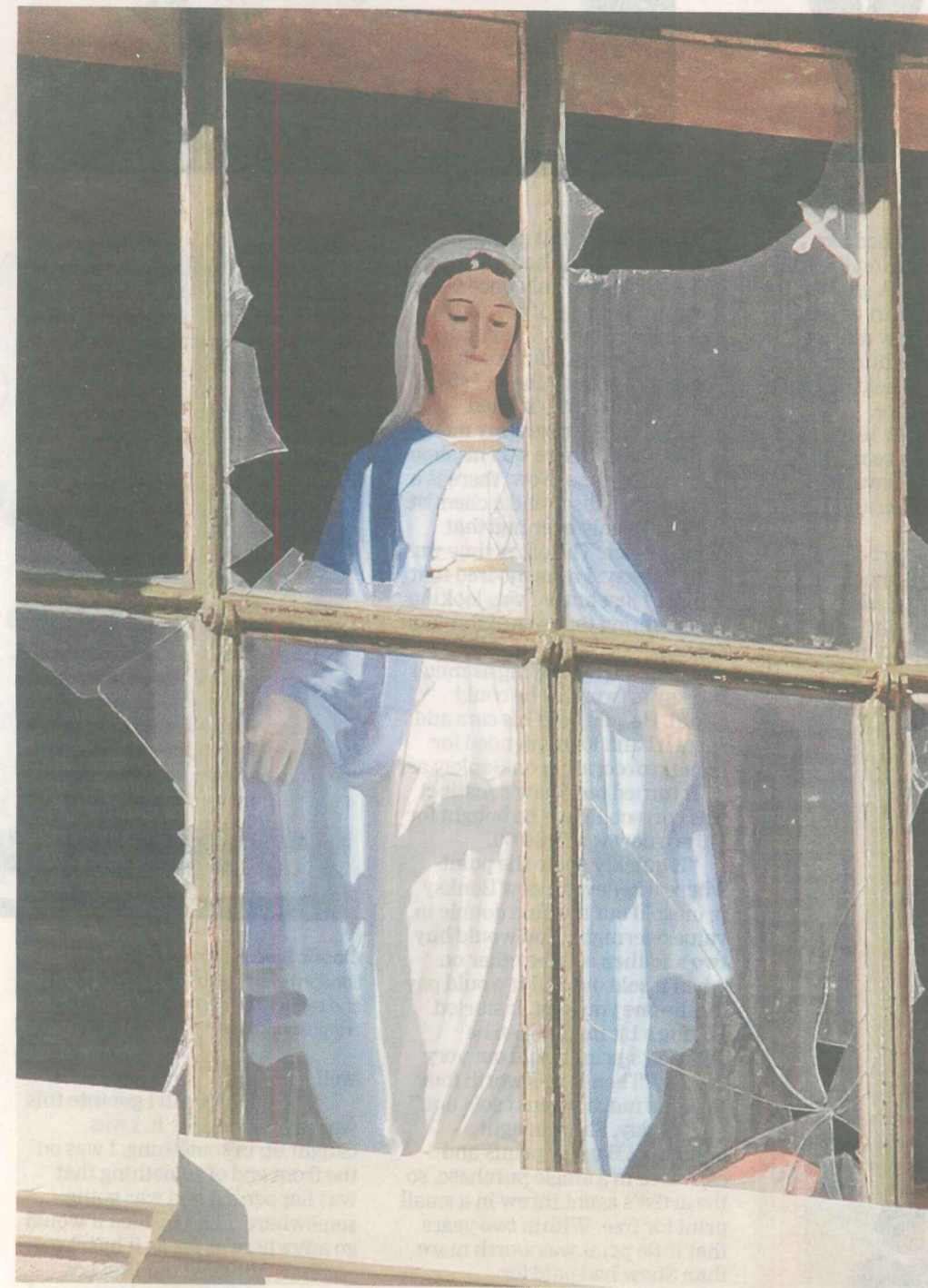
"Even within New Zealand, we are not well known. We have never had a Creative New Zealand grant."

The Free Theatre has applied "many times," he adds.

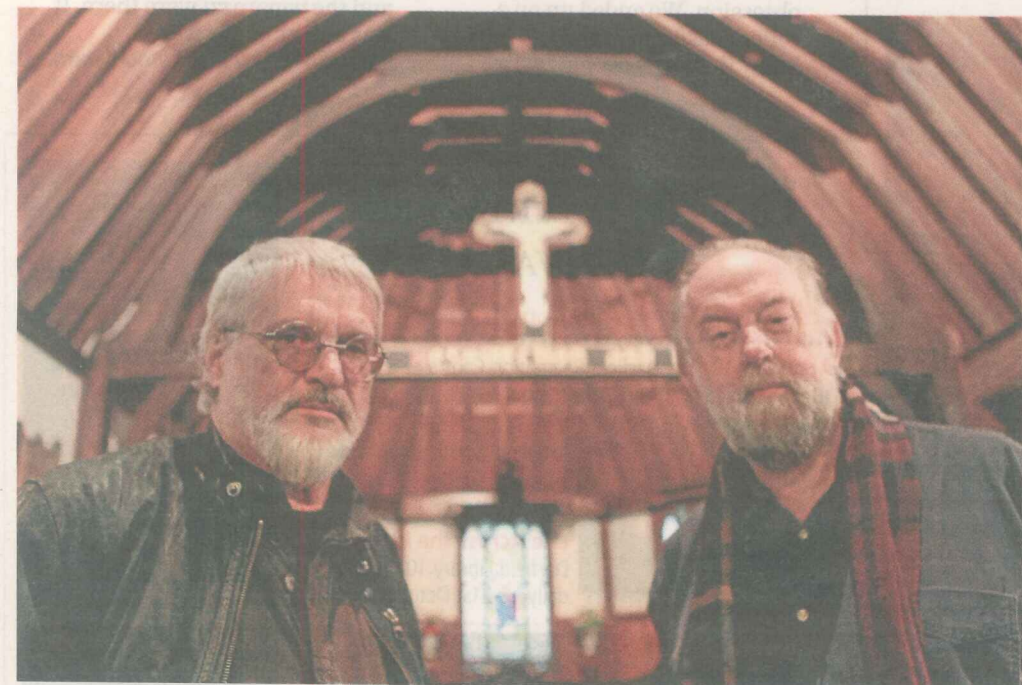
"We do not fit into the format of what they expect from theatre. As bad as that is, it keeps us on the margins and we are still as experimental and curious as we ever were. What has changed is that most of the actors and contributors have been through the university courses."

The group is isolated within Christchurch and Christchurch is isolated within New Zealand. But the situation is starting to change with recent tours to fringe festivals in Dunedin and Wellington. *Faust Chroma*, a collaboration with German writer Werner Fritsch, won fringe awards in both cities in 2008 and 2009. "That is when people started discovering we still exist," Falkenberg says. Among them was Auckland documentary maker Shirley Horrocks, who is producing a documentary on Free Theatre, having "found so many people came out of it that are now famous artists or at least New Zealand-famous".

□ *The Earthquake in Chile*, St Mary's, Addington, October 13-16.



The Free Theatre Of Christchurch's new production explores the effects of natural disaster on individual lives, with food. PHILIP MATTHEWS reports.



Collaboration: Peter Falkenberg and Richard Gough in St Mary's Church, Addington. Top: Glimpses of a shattered world and broken structures. Photos: FAIRFAX NZ