



A smorgasbord of cultural events is on display in Wellington during the New Zealand Festival.

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Rob Drummond stars in the award-winning show *Bullet Catch*.Wellington's Botanic Gardens have been transformed by *Power Plant*.

Festivity in the capital

Audiences are wowed in New Zealand's cultural hotspot, writes **Sarah Lang**.

Antonia, the peppy audience volunteer, has stopped smiling and started shaking. Taking some deep breaths, she lifts a loaded gun, points it at a magician she's come to like and trust, aims for his mouth, and fires.

The "bullet catch" is a 400-year-old magic trick where a conjuror "catches" a pre-marked bullet, usually in his teeth. It's also the name and subject of an award-winning show by Rob Drummond, a self-deprecating Scottish actor, director, playwright and magician. Drawing on his many talents, *Bullet Catch* is part-magic, part-theatre, part-comedy, part-philosophy, part-history lesson, part-psychological manipulation (nothing untoward) and completely mind-blowing, if you'll excuse the gun pun. I know Drummond won't be the 13th person to ever die during a bullet catch, but my heart skips a beat when I hear the bang.

Bullet Catch was one of the cracker shows I saw during opening week of the New Zealand Festival (February 21-March 16). Wellington is a cultural hotspot at any time, but there's no better time for culture vultures to catch a cheap flight, as there's another two weeks of the festival still ahead. For its 15th outing, artistic director Shelagh Magadza has scoured the world to find and lure the world's best acts and shows to our shores, and secure work from homegrown

talent. Cue a smorgasbord of 300 events spanning dance, theatre, circus, cabaret, music, magic, opera, film, a writers' week, and the "spectacular" label for genre-benders.

For a visual spectacle, no show tops *Power Plant* (until March 16), a world-toured light installation that's transforming the Botanic Gardens into magical spaces by night. Between the gasp-inducing projections, electric flowers, belching flames and unexpected sound effects, I felt like Dorothy exploring Oz, except I'm in no hurry to get home.

Another production full of surprises is *A Midsummer Night's Dream (As You Like It)*, which closes tonight. This isn't Shakespeare's version. Rather, it's a Russian riff on the bard's play within a play, where clownish amateur actors The Mechanicals bastardise a performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. This wonderfully silly and inventive show with its 6m-high puppets, acrobats and show-stealing dog had me laughing out loud. A play which stirred

and moved me was Auckland Theatre Company's *Paniora!* (until March 5), written by Briar Grace-Smith, and starring Kirk Torrance and Nancy Brunning. It's the tale of a part-Spanish East Coast hapu that, amid infighting, fights to preserve its unique heritage.

For something a bit different, my husband and I took part in two-person literary session *The Quiet Volume* (until March 15). Sitting incognito at a National Library reading table, we followed the disorienting instructions of a voice on an iPod and words in a notebook. This interactive experience reminded me of the forces that shape the act of reading, and whet my appetite for Writers Week (March 7-12). I won't get much work done that week as I listen to the likes of *Wild Swans* author Jung Chang, novelists Elizabeth Gilbert and Tom Keneally, historian Margaret McMillan, economist Loretta Napoleoni, literary critic Terry Castle, and our own luminaries, including Eleanor Catton.

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Paniora is based on a real-life hapu.



Ombra taps successfully into the craze for tapas.

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By day during the festival, there are some matinee shows and many Writers Week sessions. Classical concerts and talks by festival performers are slotted into lunchtimes. But that leaves plenty of time for Wellington's other attractions. Must-dos: visit wildlife sanctuary Zealandia, peep into movie-making at the Weta Cave, drink in the panorama from the Mt Victoria lookout, journey through space at the Carter Observatory, and perhaps tour Parliament. Or ride the cable car to the Botanic Gardens, and wander back to town through Bolton St Memorial Park and its tombstones with tales to tell.

When the wind is behaving, nothing beats a walk on the waterfront: that imaginatively developed, visually appealing and immensely usable public space. Starting at Queens Wharf, you'll pass parks, playgrounds, pop-up shops, markets, cafes, sculptures, ships, coffee vans, and the text sculptures of the Wellington Writers Walk.

Stop into Te Papa, City Gallery, the NZ Portrait Gallery, and the award-winning Wellington Museum of City and Sea, all en route and all staging excellent exhibitions during the festival. You'll end up at Oriental Bay beach, the perfect place for a paddle, icecream or a bite. Feeling energetic? Hire a family-sized crocodile bike, kayak or paddle boat.

No trip to Wellington is complete without a visit to Cuba St, the heart of Wellington.

Humming with hipsters, students and street performers, but frequented by all sorts, it's an unrivalled spot for people-watching — and boasts some wonderful design/gift shops, vintage stores and fashion boutiques including vintage-inspired frock shop Swonderful, and design shop/art gallery Matchbox.

Cuba St is also home to many culinary institutions including Matterhorn, Logan Brown and Fidel's. New entrants are making their mark here, too. One is Laundry on Cuba, a lounge bar/music cafe with a retro style, laidback vibe, and a caravan out back serving tacos and burgers.

Another is Ombra, one of many restaurants tapping into the craze for tapas/sharing plates. In a stripped-back 1922 building, Ombra has the look and ambience of a Venetian taverna, nearly 50 small dishes, and staff who make excellent suggestions. It doesn't take bookings, and fills up quickly, so arrive early. When time is of the essence, pre-show set menus work well, and I recommend Muse on Allen's three-course, \$65 menu of fresh, inventive dishes. The festival is also teaming up with eateries to offer exclusive deals.

I'm not festivalled out yet — not even close — so my husband's got me birthday-present tickets to two more shows. I've read rave reviews of The Tiger Lillies' take on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epic poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (March 8-9): part-cabaret, part-gig, part-theatre and part-animation. And this Classics geek

Puppets and a dog feature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream (As You Like It)*.

Muse on Allen offers fresh, inventive dishes.

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can't wait to see *An Iliad* (March 12-14). In a modern take on Homer's epic, Denis O'Hare blends black humour and provoking questions: how much has really changed since the Trojan War?

This festival entertains, wows and makes you think. And what better place to do it than Wellington?

● See festival.co.nz; facebook.com/nzfestival; WellingtonNZ.com



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