

Jo the Barbarian

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA BRIGGS

Multi-tasking theatre practitioner, performer and author
Jo Randerson talks to *Sarah Lang* about juggling multiple projects
– and about how death frames life.

Jo Randerson stands out at cultural events, with her spiky grey hair and androgynous dress sense. When people ask what she does for a living, she says ‘artist’, prompting them to ask what kind of artist. ‘I say I make theatre and interactive events, working with communities.’

Wellington’s creative community already know her as a theatre practitioner/performer/producer/director who runs Barbarian Productions, and some know she’s an award-winning playwright. But many don’t realise she’s also a published author. Jo has published books including short-story collections, and her poetry and essays have been published in literary journals and anthologies. Jo credits Bill Manhire’s creative-writing course (she won 1997’s best-portfolio prize) for her writing confidence. ‘It allowed me to see myself as a writer.’

In the past decade, she’s had little time to write as she’s focused on paying the bills, and raising sons Geronimo (10) and Caspar (7) with husband Thomas LaHood. ‘I’ve really missed writing. Recently I found some poems I’d written in snatches of time – some I didn’t remember writing!’ In September, she is self-publishing them in her first poetry book, *We’re On*. ‘They span national-identity questions around institutionalised racism, through to children in health systems.’ She’s working out distribution details. ‘I might just drive a box to Unity.’ It will also be sold through Barbarian’s website.

Last year, Jo jumped at the chance to write an essay, ‘How to Die’, for the anthology *The Journal of Urgent Writing: Volume 2* (Massey University Press). I saw her reading an excerpt at a Unity Books event. She teared up, then took a moment. ‘I was probably thinking of my kids. Death frames life and reminds you what’s important. Experiencing deaths in my late teens and early 20s – suicides, car crashes – I always wanted to know that everyone was okay.’ She likes ageing. ‘I never liked being young all that much with the murky, confusing dating and relationship minefields.’

We’re talking at the Vogelhorn Bowling Club, a cavernous 1947 building overlooking a bowling green. Jo lives a few doors down. ‘I discovered this place while walking past with the kids.’ It was rarely used for bowling – and she saw potential. Jo, with other locals, formed the Vogelhorn Community Group, and in 2015 they bought the bowling club building and land and turned it into a creative community space. (The Wellington City Council owns and rents out the Vogelhorn Hall, right next to the club.)

Jo is a Vogelhorn Community Group trust member and administrator of the Vogelhorn Bowling Club building. They’ve had funding at times through grants. But they largely make ends meet by renting office space to Barbarian and the Community Arts Trust, and by renting rooms to drama, exercise and other groups including the Foraging For Fungal Food club. ‘I took this paper bag out of the fridge thinking “yum, this looks like a brownie”, but it was actually a mushroom.’ The building also hosts community events like dance and theatre performances, Fringe Festival events, and film launches – and houses the comfortable, sun-soaked Green Café, open Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Neighbours congregate here on the last Sunday of the month for ‘Eating Together’, with food from different cuisines made by local chefs, plus a speaker or activity.

Jo’s award-winning theatre company Barbarian is based here. As artistic director (and sometimes performer), she’s the driving force behind Barbarian’s often-experimental work inside and outside theatres (including interactive street performances), collaborating with both amateur and professional individuals and groups. ‘Collaboration feeds me.’ Thomas looks after marketing, admin and accounts, and is also a co-writer/collaborator/performer. Jo admits, with a grin, that working, living and sometimes performing with your husband can be challenging. ‘I try not to talk about work too much at home.’



Barbarian's shows, which have played nationwide and in Australia, Scotland and Norway, draw attention to social and political issues, often as calls to action. 'It's not just enjoy our art, but "this is what we've been thinking about – what's your response?" I think artists should think laterally about mirroring issues.' For instance, she and Thomas played 'Her and Him' in their double-act show *Soft N Hard*, about the fraught territory of gender roles. They performed to rave reviews in Wellington in August 2017 and February this year, and will take it to Auckland in October.

Barbarian's shows often use clowning, masks, music, song, dance, wigs, puppets and physical humour. Jo was once a stand-up comedian. 'But I didn't like the male-dominated environment of comedy and late nights in bars.' Theatre and writing called.

At any one time, Jo is working on about 10 projects. She and Thomas teach a Master of Fine Arts paper about arts management at Victoria University, to address the lack of small-business skills among artists. The couple also lead gender-intelligence workshops in workplaces, in collaboration with local creative strategic consultancy Double Denim. 'We discuss common mis-communications and assumptions which are often sticking points in striving for equal relationships in the workplace.' As part of this, the couple performs excerpts from *Soft N Hard*.

Currently, Barbarian is creating a kids' polling booth for a Te Papa suffrage event in November. Meanwhile *Odd One Out* – a production co-written and directed by Jo and Thomas for Capital E National Theatre for Young People – finishes a national tour with shows at Expressions Whirinaki in Upper Hutt (3 October), and Southwards Car Museum, Kapiti, (5-6 October).

Nowadays, more of her projects get funding, but not all – and not much. In 1996 she received \$11 for three months' work on award-winning show *Black Monk*. 'I've still got that cheque somewhere.' She recently did a financial survey of independent artists. 'It's important to know what's voluntary and what's not. But I'm happy to have autonomy in my work. No one's telling me what to do.'

When Jo had already done so much, why do a Masters in Theatre Arts (Directing) in 2012? 'I had almost

imposter syndrome in directing, and directing directors. People in the industry – mainly older men – said I should just focus on one thing, not do lots of things.' Yeah, right.

Jo, who has created work for many theatre practitioners, developed the Barbarian Uprising Mentorship Programme (BUMP): an (hopefully) annual initiative which was launched in July, and funded by Wellington City Council through Toi Pōneke Arts Centre. By pairing five mentees with a mentor each, BUMP helps artists upskill in their chosen fields through hands-on work on industry projects. Successful applicants are paid the living wage to work up to 60 hours on a project; mentors receive up to 20 paid hours.

Jo has always had a strong sense of social justice. Her father, a retired Anglican bishop, was vicar at St Peter's Church on Willis Street, with its diverse congregation from homeless people to diplomats. 'It had a politically-oriented, social-justice focus. I'd twink out "he" and put "she" in the hymn books.' She considers herself a 'raised Anglican' but is interested in other faiths and practices like Buddhism. 'Our spiritual selves are an important but often-neglected part of ourselves.'

She's lived in Wellington since age four, apart from a year in Australia (working at a rest home and as a church youth worker), and a year in Belgium learning improvised theatrical comedy from Circus Ronaldo performers, then working with a theatre-maker. Her parents, GP sister Rebecca and brother Jeremy (who makes Kapakapa hot-chocolate syrup) are all still in Wellington. 'Wellington has a level of political engagement, social justice and compassion.'

Years ago, doing climate-change research for the Royal Society of New Zealand made her anxious about the future. 'I've had to accept climate change to some extent, though acting on the issue where I can. A strand of anxiety has run through my life – well, more a heightened sensitivity – with me asking what kind of world I've brought my children into.' She lives like each day like it's her last. 'Whenever I spend time with someone, I think "is this how I want to go out?" I make the most of the moments I'm in.' ■