

For immediate release

Contact:

Michael Parmenter: balfolkauckland@gmail.com (021 050 5882)

Kate Grace : balfolkdunedin@gmail.com

www.balfolk.co.nz

Centered around BALFOLK Aotearoa/NZ, the story follows Michael Parmenter and Kate Grace as they host Spring Equinox Bals in Dunedin and Auckland on September 23rd/ 25th spearheading the establishment and evolution of the popular dance style Balfolk in New Zealand.

Aligning with European Folk Day the Spring Equinox is a symbol of rebirth and new opportunities. Parmenter and Grace share their belief in Balfolk's potential to create a vibrant community and pave the way for innovative cultural possibilities. Following these events Balfolk Aotearoa/NZ has a busy schedule of events throughout New Zealand leading up to the Christmas Folk Bal on Dec 16th.

BALFOLK Aotearoa/NZ embarks over the next few months on a series of events that explore ‘new ways of dancing old dances’.

Dunedin’s weekly Josephine Mini-Bal, where dancers from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic traditions gather to dance in the lovely foyer at Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, stands as an emblem of inclusion and community engagement in a time when the cultural and political climate in New Zealand seems to be increasingly fractured. Initially conceived in 2022 by celebrated choreographer Michael Parmenter during his tenure as the University of Otago’s Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance, the monthly Balfolk event which inaugurated the initiative – referred to as a Bal – has been passionately carried on by local dance aficionado Kate Grace. Supported by the Museum's commitment to enliven its spaces, these spirited community dance events extend a warm embrace to dance enthusiasts of all walks of life, providing them the opportunity to partake in the joy of dancing together. Capping off the weekly events of varied dance styles and cultures with the monthly Balfolk event, sets this recent arrival on the New Zealand dance scene as an umbrella for the great variety of choreo-musical voices.

Balfolk, a revival of European traditional dance forms, was part of a wave of rejuvenation in social dance – including such now iconic partner forms as tango and swing – that swept across Europe and North America during the 1980s. Partner dances like waltz and

mazurka, scottish and polka sit alongside group contradances, circle dancers and mixers (dances structured to rotate partners) that are simple to learn and invite improvisation. Complex choreographies are simplified to make the dances available to as many people as possible. In contrast to the choreographed performative element associated with traditional folk-dance groups, Balfolk places the emphasis on the participatory and experiential dimension of dancing together. Although Kate Grace had been teaching French folk dances in Dunedin since 2008, Parmenter inaugurated the Balfolk movement itself in New Zealand with the establishment of Balfolk Auckland classes and bals in Auckland in 2019.

Parmenter and Grace met during the choreographer's six-month stay at the University of Otago. They discovered that their visions of community dance were both aligned yet complimentary. From his contemporary dance background, and training in contact-improvisation and Capoeira, Parmenter developed a passion for partner-dance forms. A tango dancer of long-standing he became fascinated by how the European partner dances were transformed by the encounter with the Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean polyrhythmic drive and aesthetic of improvisation to become blues dance, salsa, swing and tango. In addition to directing Balfolk Auckland and his tango teaching Parmenter teaches a weekly Balfolk partner dances class. Balfolk Dunedin's director Grace, whose background includes African dance and regional dance from her native France, has a stronger interest in group dances, particularly the European *contredanse* tradition, which she teaches alongside her Balfolk classes.

The respective interests of Parmenter and Grace cohere in that the Balfolk repertoire of dance includes in its embrace both partner dance and European group dances. Both of these dance genres were significant forms of the socio-cultural template imposed by European expansionism of the colonial era. Given that Balfolk presents itself as offering 'a new way of dancing old dances' it follows from the history of these dances that their re-imagining must take into consideration not only the way they have been dispersed and transformed through the colonial empires but the degree to which they must be considered as spreading, for both loss and gain, the hegemony of European culture throughout the New World.

Parmenter and Grace see this tension as an essential feature of their vision in situating the European movement of Balfolk in the 21st century post-colonial context. Many of their up-coming projects explicitly deal with this cultural tension and endeavour to both

question and re-imagine these European dance forms in our contemporary Antipodean culture.

Two Balfolk Aotearoa/NZ events in September align with the inaugural European Folk Day on September 23rd chosen to be celebrated on the Autumn Equinox in Europe. For New Zealand this coincides with our Spring Equinox, a transposition which already transforms an autumnal harbinger of winter withdrawal into the anticipation of new birth and the growth of new possibilities. Kate Grace plays with her own European heritage translated into the new world environment by offering, on the evening of Sept 23rd, her *Spring Equinox Folk Bal* on Quarantine Island/Kamau Taurua in the middle of Otago Harbour. This island was the site of a quarantine station that from the 1860s into the 20th century was the arrival point and first home of over 9000 passengers arriving on 41 ships that were quarantined there due to illness on board. This event acknowledges those who stayed temporarily on the island – and those who died there - with dances from the great span of European nationalities represented. Two days later in Auckland, Parmenter offers Balfolk Auckland's *Spring Equinox Folk Bal*, an event celebrating 4 years of Balfolk in Auckland with music led by master musician Craig Denham. Denham's association with Balfolk Auckland goes back to their memorable collaboration on the *New Moon Folk Ball*, a highlight of the 2020 Auckland Arts Festival. He has participated in Balfolk events in Europe and has recently composed music for new dances choreographed by Parmenter and Grace.

At the end of September, the Balfolk Aotearoa/NZ directors will be featured teachers at Folk Dance New Zealand's annual dance intensive. *The Tūranga Bal* in Gisborne will contribute to the rejuvenate of a community severely affected by the flooding events of Cyclone Gabrielle and celebrate the sense of community that has emerged in response to this tragedy.

In October Parmenter and Grace will hold a weekend of workshops in Wellington to bring new life to a Balfolk community there that hasn't recovered from the Covid period of isolation. Guest appearances at the Wellington Folk Festival a fortnight later will further nurture Balfolk in the central region of the country.

In November two featured events at the Oamaru Heritage Celebrations again acknowledge the tension between nostalgia for a world left behind and the hope for a better life in the new one. *Romantic Interludes* invokes a culture and an era fondly remembered whereas the *Lower Decks Dance* celebrates the excitement and dreams of

the early settlers. Due to the policy of assisted passage, most 19th century immigrants to New Zealand were farm workers or industrial age refugees seeking a better life in the colonies. Immigrants came from a vast array of European cultures, and this led to both innovative cultural hybrids as well as small enclaves within which attempts were made to ensure that Old World cultures would be retained.

This eventful year of Balfolk in Aotearoa/NZ will be celebrated with the Christmas Folk Bal on December 16th at the Old Church Hall in Auckland. This wonderful venue was the site of BALFOLKINO, a series of workshops and Bal presented collaboration with Lyradanz, a visiting Balfolk ensemble from Italy which toured extensively throughout the country early in the year. The example of a packed hall dancing to the thrilling music of the innovative ensemble certainly set Balfolk Aotearoa/NZ on the right foot for the year.

Parmenter and Grace are aware of the responsibility they have in directing the future of Balfolk in Aotearoa/NZ. In addition to sharing the existing repertoire of Balfolk dances, their vision for BALFOLK Aotearoa/NZ includes their desire to create new dances that might reflect the sort of society they imagine they would like to live in: one that acknowledges the land in which these dances, old and new, will take root and one that allows, like the forest chorus that greeted early settlers, a wild polyphony of voices of those who will dance them. It's not as if they are 'bringing' Balfolk to New Zealand, for they recognise that the way Balfolk is danced here must be different from how it is danced in Europe, but until other voices from within Aotearoa/New Zealand emerge, the way it is danced here will be determined by what they do now.