

The Story of EMPRESS

EMPRESS Stilt dance began in 1996 when Emily Buttle (New Zealand) took herself, a silver costume and pair of stilts to Europe with the intention of becoming a 'large-scale spectacular performance artist'. Excited by stilts, movement and costume making Emily decided to try to make a living from her art overseas.



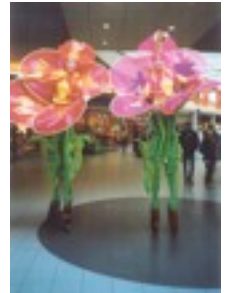
After touring around much of Europe by herself and learning the arts of stiltwalking at street theatre festivals, dance parties, rock concerts, carnivals and clubs Emily was invited to Amsterdam to work with Stef Arntz, a performance agency specialising in street theatre festivals and events around Holland, Belgium and Germany.



Emily could see that her highly visual stilt act would fit in well to the type of events that were happening in that part of Europe. She could also speak English with them.

While living in Amsterdam 1997 - 2003 Emily created a collection of costumes and grew her solo act into a duet with Sandy Wagner, who later became Samshine Stelten Theatre.

Highly successful as a duo act the EMPRESS Stilt dance characters were born. As Emily created her flamboyant costumes Flowers, Butterflies, the Silver Suits, Dream Masks and Space Ballerinas other stiltwalkers also joined the company. As all of those performers were female Emily decided to keep EMPRESS an all female stilt company. Among those early performers were Jodie Foreman (Australia) and Jelleke Jorristma (Netherlands).



The EMPRESS acts at that time were character and improvisational dance based. The duet would interact with the crowds, entertaining them with graceful dance moves and joyous characters that lifted the imagination into a more beautiful world. With a lot of work coming their way EMPRESS Stilt dance became a well-loved and popular stilt walk act on the Netherlands circuit.

Together they performed at many major events in Holland including Dance Valley, Lowlands, Mysteryland, Senstaion, Oerol, Doetinghem, Delft Zeil, Norrdwijk aan Zee and many more. During this phase EMPRESS was booked for around 50 gigs per year.

As well as the local circuit EMPRESS also appeared at international events including; The Love Parade (Germany), the Venetian Carnival (Italy), Inner City (Israel), Daidogei World Cup (Japan) and Ankara Arts Festival (Turkey).





The work was seasonal with the peak during summer and no work during the cold winter months. It was well paid but conditional on the economy. During the introduction of the Euro currency, for example, many such companies in Holland struggled and died. EMPRESS survived by having almost no overheads and a totally freelance team.

In 2003 Emily felt the need for a change and moved to the UK to explore a new performance circuit. Whilst getting gigs at Glastonbury, Notting Hill Carnival, Streets of Brighton etc, Emily felt lonely and missed her Amsterdam company. After some soul searching Emily decided to return to New Zealand and put down roots.

In Amsterdam Emily left EMPRESS running now managed by Saskia te Dorsthorst with Jelleke Jorritsma as lead performer.



Once back in New Zealand in 2005, Emily set up EMPRESS Stilt dance once more and continued to tour her interactive stilt acts, this time with a Wellington team, founded on the stiltwalking skills of Alice Capper Starr Pipi Ayesha Evans, and the artistic friendship with Ake Ake theatre company. Emily firstly worked with Ake Ake on a theatre show called Our Secret Garden, which was a successful childrens physical theatre show for the 2005 Capital E Festival.

In 2006 Jodie Foreman also moved back to Australia, her home, and with the help of Emily set up a branch of EMPRESS Stilt dance to run in Melbourne. Successfully launching her branch of EMPRESS Jodie now presents more than 40 EMPRESS gigs per year on her local circuit.



Thus began a new phase of EMPRESS. With three teams running concurrently around the globe the Butterflies, Flowers Silver Suits and other characters were now performing all the months of the year and reaching an even wider audience. Total estimated performances at this stage is around 130 gigs per year.

Back in New Zealand Emily then began to figure out how EMPRESS could present large scale shows, provide spectacular design to events, as well as continue to run the stilt walk-about acts. After completing a basic business course and securing a mentor Emily also began to see EMPRESS as an international business with potential.



The Wellington company started working together on choreographing new work, and developed a high skill range. Emily stopped performing and started full time management and directing and reaching for more ambitious projects. As many of her company were also aerial artists EMPRESS started to develop aerial and stilt combinations for new shows.

In 2007 EMPRESS was invited to perform in the Hong Kong Chinese New year Parade, taking a 14 person stilt dance team (the largest yet) and 8 drummers to perform in front of millions of viewers world wide.



In that same year EMPRESS was also invited to present a 20m high floral installation and aerial dance shows in the Sky City Casino in Auckland. 2008 saw Emily designing part of the opening and closing ceremonies for the international 7's Rugby on Wellington's Westpac stadium.

Meanwhile in 2008 Jelleke Jorritsma has been promoted to be the full time director of the Amsterdam team and has designed a new Trees act for extra tall stilts. She is working on choreographies and finding new contexts for her EMPRESS performers.



EMPRESS has ambitions. Emily would like to see each of the teams grow their own creativity, develop their own new works and come together for special international events. There is a need to create new and large-scale shows and to learn how to choreograph, produce and direct these larger works. There is a need to find new promoters and clients for EMPRESS. Emily also dreams of growing a regular performance circuit for EMPRESS in Asia.

Most of all - the dream is to fill the world with colour, light and a gorgeous feminine energy that can bring something beautiful to the lives of many.

