

Jamming draws out their ability

by Jacqueline Smith

Young Aucklanders with disabilities can for the first time take part in performing arts workshops with the aim of helping them to get a job in the future.

StarJam, an organisation celebrating the gifts and talents of people with disabilities, is piloting four CoolJam workshops in guitar, drama, hip hop and songwriting.

The organisation hopes this will grow to include 50 workshops by next year.

StarJam was set up by Julie and Roy Bartlett in 2002 when they realised the gifts they had received from Julie's younger brother who has Down Syndrome.

They were empowered by a vision that not only could the community give to people with disabilities, but that these people could give back to the community.

CoolJam organiser Victoria Anderson says: "We want to hone their skills so they can market themselves in the performing arts community — and the wider employment sector — as an asset."

"StarJam doesn't focus on the disability, we focus on the ability," she says.

Anderson says that unlike

some classes offered to people with disabilities, CoolJam workshops are designed to foster skills that can be translated into the workforce.

Plans are underway to construct a large StarJam complex complete with recording, dance and drama studios, as well as fully equipped editing suites.

The entire centre will be operated by Jammers themselves, so will become an arena for employment opportunities among people with disabilities.

Jammers have already written their own stage production which was performed at the opening of the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre in May

"StarJam doesn't focus on the disability, we focus on the ability"

last year.

For three years StarJam has collaborated with national and international celebrities to produce stage shows where young people with disabilities give inspirational and motivational performances.

When she took up the job in November 2005, Anderson said she thought she would be more

excited by the opportunity to meet celebrities than she is.

Celebrities are important for raising StarJam's profile, but Anderson says "it's the kids that give you the real buzz, it's all about them".

For the Jammers themselves, meeting and interviewing their most idolised celebrity is made possible through StarJam.

A group of Jammers and their caregivers have just returned from America where Jammers interviewed stars including Julie Andrews and Sean Austin.

"How often can a kid say, 'I want to meet Tom Cruise', and then it really happens," says Anderson.

The 200-strong turnout at StarJam's monthly meetings is indicative of the impact it has had on Jammers' lives.

It has encouraged some of the shy Jammers to come out of their shell, to perform and interact with others, Anderson said.

Some members travel from as far north as Whangarei and as far south as Bombay to the headquarters in Royal Oak.

"StarJam is great because all my friends are there," says Emma Ferens, an 18-year-old with Down Syndrome.

The push for setting up CoolJam was to allow Jammers even more involvement.

"They would literally camp out in the office if we let them,"



JAMMING: Luke Fraser and Emma Ferens hit the dance floor.

Anderson says.

Ferens attended the first Monday hiphop workshop and afterwards said she thought she had "picked up everything pretty fast".

CoolJam employs qualified and experienced tutors who must be capable of building a rapport with their class.

Ferens was impressed with her hiphop tutor. "She's really nice and she's got all the moves."

Anderson says workshops were quickly filled up so plans are underway to include more with a goal of 50 operating in Auckland per term.

Workshops are open to anyone but the pilot has been marketed at the 200 existing Jammers.

Next term Anderson will work on targeting special school and community papers.

"We want to give every young person with a disability the opportunity to be involved."

While some workshops will be teaching skills that can be easily integrated into the StarJam show, Anderson says that because of numbers not everyone in CoolJam will automatically be a part of it.

The show StarJam Rocks, which will be held at the Langham Hotel on August 26, will showcase dance, singing, acting and other performances.

The script will be entirely written by the Jammers themselves, and will involve participation from celebrities.

Kiwi actors continue to struggle

by Tim Summerville

Many New Zealand actors are struggling to make ends meet despite the recent success of our television and film industries.

With the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and other Kiwi-made films like *Whale Rider* gaining plenty of international attention, it is a common perception that the New Zealand film industry is at an all-time high.

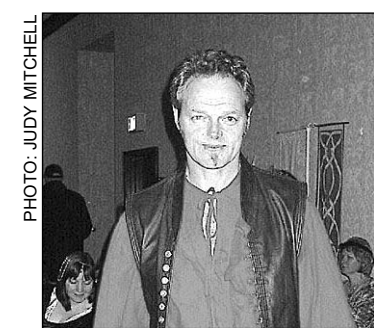
Bruce Hopkins, despite being a veteran of the local industry with roles in *Xena*, *Hercules*, *Shortland Street* and even a large role in the *Lord of the Rings*, is one of numerous actors finding it tough to get work.

For all the productions in this country, there is surprisingly little work for local actors. "The reality for me is that I haven't had a steady television or film job for two years now. That's not by choice; it's just the way it is," Hopkins says. "That's just the nature of the beast, yet to many people out there, I'm one of the most successful actors around in this country."

"The only regular — and it's not even that regular — work for an actor in this country is theatre. I'd say that 80 to 90 per cent of the theatre done in this country is done on what's called a co-operative basis. That means that you do a month of rehearsals for no pay and then share the profits, if there are

any.

"It seems like a gloomy picture I'm painting, and it is on some levels. It's not a great industry to come into to try and make a living out of, but it's a drug. There's something about it. You live a pretty kind of loose life and there's this major buzz



Bruce Hopkins

when you walk out on stage and you're in a play and you've got to be in that world and it's the same with film. When the director calls action, you've got to be in that world."

Hopkins estimates there are only about 30 full-time actors in this country making a decent living. "Most of how they're making their living is through voiceovers and commercials."

Most New Zealand actors are forced to have other jobs outside the industry, which help them to get by financially. "A number of times over the years I've tried to do things outside of acting —

investments and the like," Hopkins says. "I've done alright out of a couple of them, but I got knocked really hard a couple of times, which really knocked my confidence."

Katherine Kennard is another actor who has discovered the need for a job outside of acting.

"It's not a great industry to come into to try and make a living out of, but it's a drug."

After a successful stint on *Street Legal*, she struggled to get any work once the show was cancelled. "There's definitely an ebb and flow when it comes to getting work. After *Street Legal* finished there was a good two years of virtually nothing. I did some plays to pay the bills, but I was on the dole for ages, which is ridiculous."

She spent 10 months over in the US in an attempt to get her acting career off the ground overseas. But she soon found out that the grass isn't greener on the other side. "It's actually harder to get work in the States.

It all balances out, there's plenty of work over there, but there's also a lot more actors. In New Zealand, there's less work, but there are also less actors to compete against.

"The major difference is that in the States, when you cross the line from unknown to known, then you've got it made. But here, even if you're known, it's pretty hard to get constant work. Even when you get a job on a TV show it's only for five months or so out of the year, and for the rest of the time there's nothing."

"I don't think anyone wants to believe that this has to happen. I could hardly get an audition in 10 months in the States, which really makes you appreciate what you've got back here in New Zealand, so after that it wasn't hard to come to the realisation that maybe I wasn't going to be a big star."

It was then that Kennard realised that she needed something other than acting to not only support her financially, but also fill up her spare time. She now has a job with Kiwi Can, a youth empowerment trust in South Auckland.

"For many years I wouldn't commit to anything else. I stayed focused on my acting, just in case something big came up. But it's much more interesting now that I'm active and out doing something important; something which actually helps

people and makes a difference."

Hopkins has arrived at the same conclusion. "My advice for anyone trying to get into acting is to sort out a parallel income stream separate to acting, so you're free to pursue your acting, but you're not dependent on it to make your money."

But there is hope for the actors still clinging to the dream. After two years of struggling to get by Kennard received a call from a prominent Australian director about auditioning for a part in his new film, *Hard Drive*. "Just as I was starting to think it's never going to happen, I got a call to see Bill Bennett about a part in his new film. I met up with him and got offered the job on the spot."

Kennard secured a major supporting role, playing the part of Helena. She has just arrived back from Queensland from the first round of filming and is feeling positive about the future. "Just when I was about to give it all up this job came along. It was completely out of the blue."

Hopkins played the role of Gamling in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which has brought him some degree of international fame. "Around the world when I get invited to fan conventions and things because I had a featured role in *Lord of the Rings* people say that even if you do nothing else in your career you've already got a wonderful legacy and that is cool."