Macau in China is where you will find Franco Dragone’s spectacularly breathtaking extravaganza, *The House of Dancing Water*. A former director of Cirque du Soleil, Italian-Belgian genius creator and director, Dragone, set out to create a new genre, a human performance fusion involving dialogue between countries and people. He drew his inspiration for the largest water based entertainment the world has ever seen from his visits to China and what he observed within Chinese culture, particularly the ‘seven emotions’ derived from classical Confucian beliefs. Hence it has many ingredients of China, including Chinese graphics in its logo and haunting traditional Chinese music, a thin, reed-like, eerie sound that reflects the fantasy land in which it is set. Dragone’s observations capture the magic of ordinary simple things and create a fantasy vision, a dream world in which dance and water come together in one place.

A theatrical experience in the round, the show is permanently housed in a 2000 seat, 273 tiered theatre, where the audience gets a 270 degree view of an epic tale of love that transcends time and space amidst storms, shipwrecks, love lost and a journey of rediscovery and redemption. With a budget of US$250 million, Dragone promised the most spectacular show that Asia has ever seen. Set in an extraordinary Kingdom where nature’s magic reigns, the show will take its audiences on an awe-inspiring journey through the heights and depths of human emotions. Opening in 2010, *The House of Dancing Water* is now in its third year of production. It was an enormous challenge with 25 different countries represented by over 80 performers and 160 technicians.

The cast is an eclectic company of dancers, acrobats, motor bike stunt riders and strap artists. The moves and
stunts are dangerously death defying, so the safety of the artists is of paramount concern. One of those artists is A.B. Paterson College 2012 alumnus, Helèna Merten, who joined the company in Macau earlier this year. It would seem that Helèna has always courted danger and was destined to be a skilful gymnast/acrobat from a very early age.

“I was constantly scaring my parents climbing the trees in my back yard and teaching myself new tricks on my trampoline so, when I asked them if I could do gymnastics, they were more than happy to be putting me in a safer environment,” Helèna explains.

“Since the age of five I trained and competed in a range of sports including Artistic Gymnastics, Acrobatic Gymnastics, Diving, Power Track Tumbling and anything offered at A.B. Paterson College, all of which have contributed to where I am today and my passion for sport. I trained on the Gold Coast my entire life; however, I was invited to train at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra when I was nine years of age and later for Diving. My coaches have come from across the world - China, Belarus, America, Australia and Russia - most of whom were world class professionals during their competition or performing years.”

But it is a long way from all of this to where Helèna now finds herself. So how did it all happen and what were her initial thoughts and feelings?

“I really was in utter disbelief and it was surreal until a few weeks into being here in Macau. I knew that if I committed myself to the goal, there would be no reason why I couldn’t make it into a show as renowned as The House of Dancing Water, but to find out this was my first full time job after graduating was incredible. To me, my age wasn’t really a factor I thought about and I have always been a reasonably independent person. I couldn’t wait; I had never even been overseas before.

“My fellow artists were very welcoming. However, it was not only the artists but the coaches, scuba divers, riggers, technicians, wardrobe, band,
management and everyone that works hand in hand to drive the show. The variation of nationalities, personalities, backgrounds and talents is astounding and will forever provide something new to learn, whether it be skills, qualities or even language and culture.”

What an incredible opportunity! It must have been like a dream come true for a newly graduated high school student from the Gold Coast, Australia. Not only would Heléna leave Australian shores for the first time, but she would enter a completely different world of professional artists and technicians from all around the globe. In accepting the challenges that obviously lay ahead, Heléna reflects on her training and the show itself.

“I think one of the best things about the show is that it well and truly takes you into a whole new world. Not only are the acts and scenes unlike any other show, but the stage and special effects create an amazing performance within themselves. What also makes this show so unique is its story. It’s not just a string of circus acts; I believe everyone will receive a different interpretation of the symbols, characters and messages in the performance.

“The show is held at The City of Dreams, Hotel/Casino in Macau, China. The 2000-seat theatre has the world’s largest commercial pool, which holds more than five times the volume of an Olympic swimming pool (17 million litres of water). Even more impressive, however, is that in less than a minute, 11 hydraulic lifts frequently transform the pool into a dry stage (or conversely from a dry stage to a depth deep enough for 25 metre dives) with over 239 independent water jets, some of which reach up to 18 metres in height. The acts include Boat Diving, Human Chandelier, Straps, Russian Swing, Pyramid, High Diving and a Motorbike act all bound together by characters in harnesses and dance choreography to craft the story.

“During the boat act I am a sailor, who rises up from the sea along with three nine metre tall masts. Throughout the act we are swinging, jumping and diving. “The Human Chandelier is an aerial act, where the chandelier shaped frame, packed with 20 performers, enters the stage from 21 metres above. Here we perform choreography and skills with partners, including swings, catches and even handstands.

“The Russian swing is essentially four swinging platforms positioned around the stage with pushers and flyers. The flyers swing off the platform, performing various stunts metres up into the air and across the stage to finish with a dive into the water.

“People from all around the world and of all ages come to watch the show. The story, uniqueness of each act, together with the stage and special effects makes The House of Dancing Water appealing for anyone, and this is what makes the audience want to return. The show attracts people from all walks of life including famous people in the audience, like the King and Queen of Malaysia at our last show.

“Training ranged from strength and conditioning, choreography and character work, scuba diving, as well as all the skills for each act. Like any training, it was of course challenging at times, but working on something you love doing makes every moment enjoyable and rewarding. Now that I am performing, we also train during the day and between our two performances at night.

“I am in the House Troupe, which is an acrobatic role that has over eight different costumes. The danger factor in the show is extremely high but, of course, leaves the audience on the edge of their seats. For every risk in the theatre, an equal safety measure is put into place. For example, the pool lifts have a tape switch which, when touched, completely stops the lifts from moving and, therefore, eliminates the risk of anyone or anything becoming trapped between the lifts. There is a hand signal which, when given by anyone, will immediately stop the entire show and cameras situated above and under the water to ensure the performer’s safety.”

Heléna considers the future much as a blank canvas. Anything is possible.

“From here I am truly unsure what is next, I couldn’t think of a better place to be right now, so once opportunities arise I will decide. I know I will certainly continue to travel in my spare time and perhaps volunteer. Other than this, I simply hope to work or study in something that I love.”

We hear so often the catchphrase “chance of a lifetime” and certainly this is just that, but it is an opportunity that Heléna has grasped with all of her being, embracing the unfamiliar, the unknown and the downright scary. Her comfort zone is but a mere distant memory, superseded by an experience that is exciting, exhilarating and defining. It will be a hard act to follow.

Thanks to Heléna for giving us insight into her incredible new world. We salute your courage and tenacity and wish you well in the Franco Dragone Entertainment Group.

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