



*Now that's what I call a water feature – the Pont du Gard*



*My private arena in Arles – bull fight anyone?*



*A thespian awaits his fans at the Roman Theatre in Orange*

So what to make of 2008? In many ways there was the familiar cycle of mundaneness, punctuated by headline events. So rather than drone on and bore the pants off you, let's go tabloid and focus on the BIG events – minus the page-three girl, of course.

**The Parable of the Prodigal Piano** – John Thomas Topham was a prominent citizen in Mount Gambier, South Australia, in the late nineteenth / early twentieth centuries. He had migrated with his family to South Australia from Lincolnshire in England. When he decided that he wanted an upright piano for the parlour, he didn't simply go out and buy one, or even commission the building of one. He eyed off a living walnut tree, and several years later he had hand made a solid walnut upright piano! The walnut tree was felled and the lumber dried, cured and milled. Eventually, J.T. manufactured a piano cabinet to house an iron sound board. He is said to have hand carved the keys and the hammers and other parts for the piano action. Certainly, his grand-daughter, Lillian Topham, recalled helping her grandfather stick the felts on when she was a little girl. The history of the piano is then silent for many decades. So where do I fit into this story? J.T. Topham was my great-great-grandfather and Lillian Topham was my grandmother! About 15 years ago, I visited a couple down Reynella way (in the southern suburbs of Adelaide). I knew them slightly, but I went with a mutual friend. In their family room was a piano, and I instinctively sat down to play it. Only a few bars into Grieg's piano concerto I stopped with a start when I realised that the maker's name plate read "J.T. Topham / Maker"! It transpired that some time after my visit to Reynella, the piano had been consigned to a storage lock-up in Prospect, and there it sat – for years! Late last year, the husband died, and the family turned their attention to clearing out the storage lock-up. When they "unearthed" the piano, someone in their family remembered my visit of fifteen years earlier. They tracked me down, and offered to return the piano to my family. Now professionally restored to playing condition, the J.T. Topham piano graces my lounge room – all I have to do is brush up on my Grieg! The family is indebted to the family and friends of the late Ziggy Liepse. J.T.'s piano will pass from me (but not for a long time, I trust!) to my cousin Brenna, on the understanding that it is never again to leave the descendants of J.T. Topham.



*The J.T. Topham Piano*



*See what happens to you at 50 years old!*



*Alan and Nam – I'm the pretty one*

**Cyber-predators on the Internet** – I finally succumbed to the thrall of broadband internet access at home and even signed up on Facebook! The latter has proved to be a remarkable means of reconnecting with folks. The most potent example came when I received a message from Phil Hoggan, a friend from Cambridge days and with whom I had had no contact since 1983! It seems that we each kept in touch with a mutual friend – and Facebook did the rest. Phil is a Professor of Theoretical Chemistry at Université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, and we were able to meet up in Lyon for the day in July when my mother and I toured southern France. There are also of course many and varied dating sites on the internet – so I am told. Nam Duong, an electrical engineer from Ho Chi Minh City and now working in Adelaide, should have known better than to make contact with the Wicked Professor. He'll now be in therapy for years. Oh my ...



Lunch in Lyon



Bouillabaisse at the Old Harbour in Marseille



Getting gaudy with Gaudi in Barcelona

**Franco-Australian Relations Strained** – Once again, my mother Joan and I ran away to Europe in July, this year to the south of France and then on to Barcelona in northern Spain. The primary motivation was again my passion for all things Roman and ruined: there are a staggering number of extremely well preserved Roman structures in this area. Our principal stops were Lyon, Avignon, Nîmes and Barcelona, with day visits to Arles (by boat down the Rhône), Aix-en-Provence, Marseille, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (and the nearby ruins of the Roman city of Glanum), Les Baux-de-Provence (whence the name of the ore 'bauxite'), Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Orange, the aqueduct of Pont du Gard (first prize in the Roman ruins competition) and the monastery at Montserrat outside Barcelona. We had our moments: I hurt my back on day two in Lyon; Joan did some break-dancing on the cobbles of Avignon; and, I had a good try at concussion on a low ceiling in the aqueduct channel at the Pont du Gard. A pharmacy in St-Rémy had a neon sign proclaiming that English was spoken therein – they lied! Joan persisted in trying to get across that she was allergic to many types of antiseptic creams, in response to which hay-fever tablets were produced. At this point I exploded in rage. The one pharmacist who could speak English was at lunch it seems: staff scrambled to find him, leaving another customer to try to stop me shouting. We finally did get what we wanted. Later in the trip, we arrived at the train station in Nîmes and walked straight into the crowds waiting for *Le Tour de France*. We clearly were going nowhere for a time, so we settled in with our cases and joined in the madness. Twenty minutes later there was a whoosh of lycra and it was all over – a bit like life really.

**Senile Quinquagenarian Runs Amok** – I celebrated my fiftieth birthday on August 14th. I do believe that it will last in people's memories for years to come! There was much comic mayhem, including a group of rather masculine looking nuns singing a bawdy parody of "A Few of My Favourite Things" from *The Sound of Music*!! I certainly had a blast and I have now launched myself into my second half-century in fitting style. Check out the photographs on Facebook!

**Audience Faints en masse** – My opera-going saw no refrain in 2008: four in Melbourne, two in Adelaide and two in Sydney, as well as some high-definition cinema screenings from The Met in New York. The highlight was a performance of Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* in Sydney: the legendary Philip Langridge as Captain Vere, the consummately evil John Wegner as Claggart, and the impossibly handsome Teddy Tahu Rhodes (swoon) as Billy Budd, shinnying up the fore-topmast stripped to his waist (did I mention 'swoon'?).

**Tight Race for Deputy's Position** – To further demonstrate my lapse into senility, I applied for a third three-year term as Deputy Head of the School of Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics (as it is now known) at Flinders University. Despite the fact that I was the two-term incumbent and only applicant, the process was a rather drawn out affair rivalled only by the electoral processes that were happening concurrently in the USA. Unlike in the USA, the Deputy's position here was in the end filled by the pit-bull with lipstick. The *quid pro quo* for my reapplying was that I am now esconced in a light and airy office away from the madding crowd, having escaped the dismal cave that has been my home for the previous six years. We all have our price!



**Best wishes for 2009, with love from Alan**

*Ave Hadrianus Imperator!*