



MAGAZINE CONFIDENTIAL

By MIKE COHEN

Montreal flavour at the CTV London bureau

LONDON - There is a distinct Montreal flavour at the CTV bureau here in London, England, with Ben O'Hara-Byrne and Daniele Hamamdjian serving as the national network's team on the ground.

I got to know both of these native Montrealers as they were cutting their teeth in the business, Hamamdjian at the local CTV newsroom then known as Pulse and O'Hara-Byrne with Global. Hamamdjian joined CTV National News in 2009. She recently covered Nelson Mandela's funeral in South Africa, the Commonwealth Games in Scotland, the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia and the crisis in Ukraine. While previously assigned to the Ottawa Bureau, she travelled with the Prime Minister's office numerous times, including to the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, Korea in March, 2012; the G8 Summit in France in 2011 and Northern Ireland in 2013; Afghanistan for the Prime Minister's final visit to the troops before the pullout; and the annual trip to the Arctic, tracing Canada's international diplomatic efforts.

Hamamdjian began on-air reporting for CTV Montreal in 2006. A Concordia University journalism graduate, she actually began her career as general assignment reporter at the Santa Monica Daily Press in California. Born in Cairo, Egypt, she lived in Los Angeles before immigrating to Montreal with her family in the late 1980s and settling in Laval. She speaks French, English, and is conversational in Arabic and Italian.

O'Hara-Byrne moved to London after a stint as CTV's Beijing Bureau Chief. He spent three years covering stories across China, including the visits of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President Barack Obama, and the 20th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square. He has also reported from Afghanistan, Libya, North Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Russia. Winner of an RTNDA award in 2007 for Best Network Spot News for the Conrad Black Verdict (Global), O'Hara-Byrne was also a 2007 Gemini Award co-nominee for Best Reportage. He grew up in Mile End, right around the corner from the St. Viateur Bagel factory and lived in Outremont through his teens. "I finished high school at Royal West Academy and I credit my time there, the teachers I had and friends I made, for kick starting what has been a very interesting journey through life so far," he says.

Hamamdjian says she still pinches herself when she walks through the streets of London. "I ask myself 'how did I get here?' and then I realize how really fortunate I am," she told me. "I love Montreal, but when they say that London is the center of the world cul-

turally and financially they are not kidding. It is impossible not to have something to do and see here."

I would agree with Daniele on that point. We were there for a week and did not accomplish anywhere near the number of stops we had planned.

As for O'Hara-Byrne, he says "the posting in London is really a wish come

the Ukraine, you never have much warning. Pack your bag and you are off."

Hamamdjian's family still resides in Laval and she was back home recently for a brief visit.

During her time at the CTV Ottawa bureau, Hamamdjian clearly impressed her superiors. She was part of the first international reporting team on the

interview."

ANNA ASIMAKOPOULOS IN PARIS

Avid viewers of CBC TV who may be wondering where popular entertainment reporter Anna Asimakopoulos has been for the past year need look no further than Paris, France.

Asimakopoulos, husband Preston Chase and kids Clara and Nicholas touched down in Paris last January 1. They are scheduled to return in September.

"It has been a remarkable experience," Anna says. "We are living in the 11th arrondissement, and our kids are going to a neighbourhood school right around the corner. We have all become fantastic walkers, and have explored the city thoroughly. Not too long ago, friends came to visit us, and we took them for a walk along the promenade plantée. It was a 2.2 km walk from our place to the Bastille. Where we located the promenade, which runs along an old train track which has been planted and covered in vines rose bushes and fountains, 4.6 km later we emerged at the Bous de Vincennes, where we walked another few kilometres. If we took the bus home it was because our guests were exhausted. The kids, who are 6 and 9, were still jumping around."

When I reached Anna, she had just finished running some errands at which time "I did what I love to do most - get lost and see where I end up. It was amazing. Paris is great to just wander through."

Anna says she came to Paris with a few goals, some, like improving her French, more easily attainable than others. "On my list was cooking classes," she says. "I briefly toyed with the idea of



Ben O'Hara-Byrne and Daniele Hamamdjian

true. The CTV bureau here is responsible for all of Europe so that offers an endless supply of fascinating and challenging stories, everything from the battlefields of past wars to ongoing conflicts in places such as Ukraine. On days off, the city itself is always fascinating, as the saying goes, bored of London, bored of life."

After working out of Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto and Ottawa, O'Hara-Byrne accepted the fact that moving around would be part of the job. "But I had no idea when I decided to apply for a correspondent's position in Beijing in 2008 that I'd still be abroad in 2014," he says.

"I really enjoyed the China assignment. So much is changing so quickly there and elsewhere in Asia. I also met my wife in Beijing, so it was a life-changing time. It's always difficult to pack up and move to yet another new city, but London is its own reward."

Because of the centrality of London, Hamamdjian and O'Hara-Byrne never know when the call will come for them to hop on the plane and go to any location around the globe. "I love what I do," Hamamdjian says. "The bottom line is you are in this business because you love to tell stories. For stories like

ground in Haiti after the devastating earthquake that rocked the country in 2010, and she also travelled to Guantanamo Bay in August 2010 to report on the Omar Khadr case. "Guantanamo Bay was probably the strangest place I have ever been to," she says.

Hamamdjian's coverage of international affairs is balanced by the Canadian stories she has covered, including the 2011 Federal Election. Her coverage of the Attawapiskat housing crisis in 2011 led to testimonies of alleged rampant sex abuse in Attawapiskat and native communities across the country. And then there is the Nigel Wright coup. Wright was the chief of staff to Prime Minister Harper and got in very hot water when he handed over a personal cheque of \$90,000 to disgraced Senator Mike Duffy to try and get the latter out of a jam. He ultimately was forced out of the job because of this. Nobody seemed able to corner Wright for an interview. When Hamamdjian found out that Wright took his daily jog at 4:30 a.m. she decided on a stake out. "He was not too happy to see us and I had to run after him," she says. "Everyone knows that you do not run away from a camera. It does not look good. So he stopped and gave me the



Anna Asimakopoulos, husband Preston Chase and kids Clara and Nicholas at the Eiffel Tower.

going to the Cordon Bleu, but rejected it, I just couldn't picture myself there. Then, I thought of Moroccan cooking classes. A friend suggested I try the Réseau d'échange, a forum where people exchange skills with each other at no cost. I posted a message -- English classes in exchange for the secrets to Moroccan cuisine.

"While I waited for a reply, I took a closer look at the butchers' stalls in the market. The chickens with heads and feet and feathers didn't look too appealing, and besides they cost as much as a rabbit, and chicken legs cost as much as cuisses de canard. So I began to experiment. Aiguillettes de canard are thin slices of what I believe is duck breast, which taste great seared in butter, and seasoned with salt and pepper. The first time he ate one, Nicholas waved it in the air and said 'oh I like this chicken.' Then I moved on to duck legs, roasted following a Nigella Lawson recipe, with

butcher chops those bits off, and then quarters it for you. He asked me what I was going to do to the chicken. 'Ah ce poulet finit bien ça vie,' he said approvingly."

It took two months, and the arrival of their first visitors before they did the main Paris tourist attractions. The whole month of January, armed with some top 10 and even a top50 lists of things to do in Paris with kids, they went to places they never knew even existed before.

THE ORIGINAL GRÉVIN

While there has been a Grévin (www.grevin.com) at Montreal's Eaton Centre since April 2013, this place is the original. In fact, only one other exists in the world – in Prague, Czech Republic. This is a fabulous wax museum, with a specific French feel in terms of many of the actors and historical figures featured. I nonetheless got to pose with



Mel B., Cheryl Cole, Simon Cowell and Louis Walsh.



René Angelil and Céline Dion visit the Grévin in Paris to see their wax models. Grevinjolie.jpg

thyme. As time went on, I became curious about rabbit. A google search threw up some interesting possibilities, including an easy sounding recipe for roasted rabbit slathered in butter with herbs, and a white wine and lemon sauce. It was delicious, and the kids did not get upset at all, although that may be because they are now used to the butchers' stalls in the markets displaying everything from cow tongues to pig heads. I have since tried rabbit basted with Dijon mustard over a bed of wild mushrooms, rabbit in a red wine sauce, and am eyeing more rabbit and duck recipes."

In the end, Anna found her Moroccan cooking classes. They were sitting under her nose the entire time. In early March, she and a friend went to the Moroccan restaurant next door. The lady serving kept trying to talk to them in charmingly broken English. "I pitched her the idea of an exchange, and she went for it," she said. "The family's favourite Moroccan dish so far is chicken with limes and coriander. It involves cooking an entire chicken. So, I went to the butcher around the corner, and discovered buying a whole chicken with head and feet is not so bad after all. The

likes of Elton John, Angelina Jolie, Nicholas Cage, Barack Obama, our very own Céline Dion and René Angelil and many other familiar faces. Your visits starts off with a unique sound and light show. I am now ready to visit the museum in Montreal. Aurélie Gombert, the communications director in Paris, said that plans call for a new Grévin to open every year or so. I would think that the United States would be next on the list, not to mention places like Toronto and Vancouver in Canada.

Amidst the crackle of photographers' flashes, the celebrities in the headlines all meet at the most Parisian of addresses. Discreet atmosphere and evening dress mandatory for a cocktail party with the stars of showbiz, top international singers and the piano at an impromptu jam session, or a relaxed environment to share a friendly glass at the brasserie with the big names of the French cinema industry; the Grévin creates the illusion of an interactive meeting in its new decor. During the visit, a fashion show podium, a dance studio, or a box at the theatre give visitors a unique opportunity to meet their favourite artists and to glimpse the Spirit of Paris.

From the Middle Ages to the 21st Century, with the Renaissance and the Second Empire along the way, the Grévin conjures up the great events of History. Joan of Arc burning at the stake, Louis XIV and his court in Versailles, or the assassination of Henri IV, are some of the all-important historical events that visitors are invited to experience. The 20th Century is shown as a sequence of snapshots, like 3-D photographs; from the first step on the moon to the fall of the Berlin wall, each picture is a part of history. There is an Italian style theatre, constructed in 1900, with a slew of wax figures spread about

When Canadian Idol aired on CTV, my family and I headed down to Toronto each summer to watch live episodes. We did the same for So You Think You Can Dance Canada. Unfortunately both programs went off the air. Last May, while in Los Angeles, I got to see American Idol live. So what was next?

THE X-FACTOR

On our last night in London, England we sat inches away from the one and only Simon Cowell at Wembley Arena for what are called Arena Auditions in the hugely popular X-Factor UK series.

You should recall the US version on Fox, which was cancelled last winter after three seasons. Now in its 11th season here, Cowell owns the show. It attracts as many as 20 million UK viewers an episode on Britain's ITV. Unlike American Idol and its British equivalent Pop Idol (no longer in existence), The X Factor has no upper-age limit. Groups can apply, and contestants are also split into categories. There are five stages to the competition: Producers' auditions (these auditions are un-televised, and decide who will sing in front of the judges); Judges' auditions (either in an audition room, an arena, or both); Bootcamp (originally a series of challenges and knock out rounds, then the seat challenge since series 10); Judges' houses and Live shows (finals). Joining Cowell on the judging panel are drop dead gorgeous UK recording sensation Cheryl Cole, Mel B from the Spice Girls and noted Irish entertainment manager Louis Walsh. He has been a judge on the

show since its inception.

Now I must tell you that my press credentials came with strict conditions. There were no live photos or videos of the auditions. I cannot report upon the names of the performers, what they sang or specific comments from the judges. We were told to arrive at 2:15 p.m. for a 3 p.m. live show. The wonderful tube (subway) left us off right on site. When we arrived at the special gate we were told there was a delay. Proceedings finally began at about 4:30 p.m., with over 3,000 screaming fans in the arena located right next store to massive Wembley Stadium. Standup comic Ian Royce was the warm up act and he was absolutely hilarious. The judges soon made a much celebrated entry. Once they sat down we were all told not to have any cameras or cell phones snapping shots.

The auditions went on for about four hours. It was a great presentation, unlike anything I saw at the Idol shows. One by one the performers come on stage. They are basically interviewed by the judges, who have seen them in previous rounds, and asked to give a little background about themselves and to preview what they will sing. I thought the judges had pretty good chemistry, especially Cowell and Cole who have been known to butt heads on occasion. Seeing Cowell live was quite a thrill. He really says what is on his mind, unconcerned about hurting anyone's feelings. In fact, it seems that all four judges have the same philosophy. They are at times downright cruel in some cases.

"We are honest," Walsh told me, when I unexpectedly ran into him later that night.

How do the judges feel when they see candidates getting all emotional on stage because of their sometimes harsh criticism? "That's too bad," he remarked with a smile. "This goes with the territory. I will say that I believe we have a good group of performers this year."

This looks like a great show. How about CTV bringing it to Canada?

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