

Qi Huan teaching at New Zealand School of Dance
Photo: Steven Boniface



QI HUAN

Giving 100%

By Francesca Horsley

Qi Huan former dancer with the Royal New Zealand Ballet has now embraced teaching dance. This article explores his career changes.

Five months into his teaching role with the New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD), former Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB) principal ballet dancer, Qi Huan says he is exhausted.

“Teaching,” he says ruefully, “is very hard work.” After a nine-year career as a leading dancer with the RNZB he notes “It has been challenging because it is a different role, it requires a different energy, and style, compared to what I had as a professional dancer.”

“The responsibility is bigger now. I used to just concentrate on myself, to do things right, not to make mistakes and try to be the best. Now I have to make the whole class of about 25 people do their best work. You have to pay attention to their each single movement and make them do the right thing. It is exhausting, but I am getting used to it.”

Qi says a dance career requires dedication and if they are to succeed students have to work hard. “A ballet career is very tough – if you don’t work hard you don’t get a job – you don’t get a contract.” But like all teenagers, NZSD students can lose focus. He says it is part of his job to remind them that they need to concentrate each day, make themselves ready every day and commit themselves 100%.

Giving 100% seems to come naturally to Qi. From Shenyang in China’s Liaoning Province, he began ballet lessons at nine, two years later beginning full-time training. A serious injury in his final year at the Beijing Dance Academy meant he had to put his career on hold. Not knowing whether he would be able to dance professionally again, he completed a Bachelor’s degree in teaching and performing arts in ballet, and taught at the Beijing Dance Academy from 2003 – 2004.

Thankfully his knee healed. He joined the RNZB in 2005 on the recommendation of Ou Lu, a former principal dancer with the RNZB who was also teaching at the Beijing Academy.

Qi, now 33, has much to bring to the NZSD. One of his main responsibilities includes the technique class, which is the daily ritual for all professional dancers. He also teaches the pas de deux class. “I feel very confident because I have been doing partnering since I was 18 or 19.”

He also teaches the repertoire class where small sections of a big production – for example the pas de trois or pas de deux from *Swan Lake* - are taught, not only for the choreography and technique, but also for expression. Qi says there is no actual acting class,

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but during the sessions he imparts how to interpret a role. This is not just his experience, he says, but also the knowledge of everyone who has taught him. "It becomes a very rich experience."

Working with male students is also an important role. Qi credits his impressive jumps and elevation to his mother – he inherited her strong legs. "They are quite powerful and they made life much easier when I was a dancer. However if you have a big jump it is not easy to control because you have so much power, so much energy. Learning how to control this energy took me a long while. But after a certain amount of training you know how to control it, how it feels in the air."

Maintaining flexibility is the hardest challenge for a male dancer, Qi says. As they grow older their muscles become bigger and this constricts flexibility. "Maybe when male dancers are younger, before 16 – 17, they may be still quite flexible but after they get older this decreases. To be very powerful and very flexible is hard to maintain because they are opposites."

It is important for a female dancer to be able to do the splits. "Some of the students cannot do a split, but I think this is not acceptable because when dancers do a grand jeté their legs should look straight in the air and not drop down."

Qi says flexibility is not something you work on and then say – "Oh this week I am quite flexible so I don't have to work on my flexibility for the next two weeks. No you have to work throughout your whole career as soon as you start dancing – basically it always follows you. You cannot get rid of it so that is part of your life if you want to be a dancer."

While Qi is giving his full-time commitment to teaching he has not quite hung up his dancing shoes. He takes a daily class and works hard to keep his fitness and body condition to be able to take on small dance projects in the future. In August he relished performing in a gala in Mexico, along with Gillian Murphy. "I wouldn't mind enjoying a little bit of stage life rather than just cut off this career completely straight away."

"Garry Trinder (Director NZSD) is very supportive and he said that if I have some opportunities he would definitely support me to be a guest or do a little more dancing before I become an old man," he laughs. ■



Gillian Murphy & Qi Huan in Royal New Zealand Ballet's Giselle
Photo: Evan Li