

competitive events benefit young dance students by exposing them to a wide range of ideas, choreographic techniques, genres, cultures, physical function and learning abilities. Competitions provide parameters emphasising sameness and homogeneity with interest generated through remarkable physical facility and level of difficulty. These parameters generally produce

Sharing is Learning

By Melanie Turner

While many dance genres thrive on competition, this article provides some insights into the role of dance for young people within a non-competitive dance environment.

Non-competitive youth dance events have a very important role to play in the development of our youth dance community. While non-competitive dance has been largely represented in the primary school sector, there has been recent growth of secondary-aged non-competitive dance.

Sharing is a powerful learning tool, the significance of which is often underestimated. Watching dance informs our own dance making. For young people, watching and participating in a non-competitive youth dance event enables them to position their work within an age-relevant context. Comparing their own work favourably to that of peers builds confidence. Observing dance students who see themselves as artists and take their creative work seriously, emboldens young choreographers to explore and experiment with ideas new to them. Non-competitive dance events provide peer examples of what may be achieved in performance and inspires young dancers to strive higher.

A key difference between competitive and non-competitive dance events is diversity. Non-

significant unison, demonstrations of virtuosity, literal representations and episodic or strongly narrative choreographic structures.

Bounce Northern Dance Network in Auckland produces a non-competitive youth dance festival called *YouDance* to celebrate artistic expression of dance artists in their late teens. Now in its third year, *YouDance* is an annual event bringing together secondary-aged students learning dance in the school curriculum and NCEA, or in youth dance companies. However, this distinction is often redundant as individuals frequently participate in dance both in and out of school, with each complementing the other.

YouDance emphasises a positive, collegial environment of sharing and learning from peers, while showcasing high quality work in youth dance. That young people inspire each other creatively and artistically in a positive spiral is evident in *YouDance* through the rapidly rising quality of work presented and performed.

Absence of competition promotes diversity in dance and enables experimentation, creative risk-taking and artistic expression (contingent on a clearly defined focus or stimuli being provided). Youth choreographers at *YouDance* present remarkably articulate, unified dances which introduce, develop and resolve ideas in artistic ways.

YouDance aims for a balance between student and adult choreographed work, between high and low decile schools and the cultural diversity of the participants. The event recently moved to the Maidment Theatre on the University of Auckland campus to enable dance students to connect with the tertiary dance



Tauranga Dance Festival
Photo: Chris Jones

Newest kid on the block is the inaugural *Tauranga Youth Dance Festival*. It was set up to unite the local dance community of Tauranga by bringing studios and schools together in an environment where they can inform and learn from each other. Festival week includes three nights of shows to showcase school and studio choreographed work, a youth choreographed show, and a curated triple bill of three young choreographers.



YouDance Festival
Photo: Nina Gaestrich

environment and value their work in a professional venue. The event remains over-subscribed.

The *YouDance* experience has shown that sharing ideas leads to a rise in the quality of youth choreography. The festival seems to be “normalising” artistic expression and creative risk for young people.

The *Otago Dance Festival* was a pre-cursor to *YouDance* and involved schools such as Rutherford College, Otago College, Mt Albert Grammar School and Avondale College. The annual one-day, informal event also demonstrated the value of sharing for learning, and was hugely valuable to participating schools for reinforcing confidence in ability and inspiring increased student effort.

In Nelson, the *Vast Dance Festival* celebrates the combined talents of secondary students in the “top of the South” region. *Vast* provides a platform for student choreographers to share their work. Dance students from nine secondary schools gather in a one-day event to participate in choreography and genre workshops, perform in a professional environment, celebrate the range of dance styles in the region, and gain practical experience in lighting, front of house, design and stage management.

“Without judging criteria to adhere to, choreographers and dancers can explore ideas that wouldn’t fit in a competition setting,” says festival co-ordinator Caitlin Williams. “The creativity of young people astounds me and I want to give them a platform to showcase their talent without reining it in to tick certain boxes.” With little available for young dancers in Tauranga after their schooling, Williams hopes the festival will provide an incentive to retain dancers in the region and expand the dance community there.

The dance experiences of teens in secondary schools and youth companies are an increasingly important part of a dance career pathway leading into tertiary dance training and the professional industry. The dance community is well aware of the contribution of tertiary institutions in training new professionals, but it is secondary schools and studios that feed dancers into tertiary training. It is easy to forget we were all secondary students once!

The primary-aged sector also has non-competitive dance events such as Wellington’s long standing *ArtsSplash*, Christchurch Primary Schools *Cultural Festival* and *Fresh Moves* in Tauranga. Primary dance in school will be featured in a future article. ■