Peter Burley, Godfrey Sims and Adrienne Kirk founded CircoArts in Christchurch in 1995. The school flourished and seeded the development of circus across New Zealand and as far away as Australia. That is until 2011 when it became an unfortunate victim of the earthquakes. The impact of this school cannot be underestimated and their accomplishment of embedding a degree in circus into the New Zealand Qualifications framework is yet to be emulated.

Deb Pope, another pioneer responsible for the growth of the form in New Zealand, believes that circus is a dance. Whilst on her big OE, she was drawn in through acrobatics, learning from an old Hungarian chap in Brixton in the late 70s and early 80s. London at that time was a real hot bed for talent with dancers and physical theatre exponents developing a ‘new wave’ of the form.

“The act or series of tricks is still important but it is like an old house with a new glass wall around it so you can still see the structure of the old form,” is how Deb describes it. She went on to found the Wellington Circus Trust, along with Alice Capper Starr and Tom Beauchamp in 2005. This hub is still going strong under the leadership of Claire French with classes for the community, a youth circus troupe and training facilities for professionals. The appetite for community participation in circus is a growing trend worldwide.

Pioneering once again, Deb Pope and Ann Gare are introducing a new course at Whitireia that combines dance and circus. “Dance requires exceptional skill and knowledge of the body in space and this is true of circus as well,” explains Ann. “Dance is a form of visual theatre and with the aerial component of circus there is the possibility of dancing in the air.” Circus is based upon the development of high level tricks but both Ann and Deb agree that without the expressivity and the line of dance there is no artistry.

Circus is an ancient art, full of skill, daring and grace. The first circus, as we know it today, took place in 1768 when a crowd gathered around a ring formed of stakes and rope in London. Its roots, however, touch upon many cultures. Whether presented on a stage or in a ring in the classical style, it is, as Ernest Hemingway said, “an ageless delight.”
Geoff Gilson studied dance at UNITEC – these days you will find him performing and training with The Dust Palace; a raunchy and hot circus troupe in Auckland, which combines elements of dance theatre and burlesque. He slid into circus from dance after studying apache or acro-balance; one of the several strands of circus – think strong man balancing lithe and petite woman on various bits of the anatomy and flinging her around; although there are versions where women balance each other.

He was drawn to this new dimension of partnering skills and the possibility of morphing them with contemporary dance partnering, floor work and contact improvisation to come up with another form. It felt like a logical progression for him. Geoff believes that a contemporary dance sensibility can inform the circus work when “movement pathways are imbued and interesting and it not just about the tricks.”

According to Eve Gordon who came from an acting background to form The Dust Palace in Auckland, “Circus doesn’t exist without dance; it is a form of dance.” In their work The Dust Palace are endeavouring to present stories with an emotional gravitas. In modern circus, choreography is important. The work can move from naturalism to abstraction to narrative.

Whilst in her third year at the New Zealand School of Dance, Natalie Hona was asked by Tom Beauchamp (Fuse Circus) to be part of a circus project for his directing studies at Toi Whakaari / The New Zealand Drama School. She was captivated by the art of acro-balance and quickly progressed to aerial silk, where acrobatics are performed whilst hanging from a special fabric, and then to low trapeze. “In another life I would have started earlier with circus. It is extremely difficult to do it well. I couldn’t get the same flow that I feel with dance because I started a bit late with it.” She agrees with the other opinions expressed in this article that the movements in between tricks constitute the artistry and flow that gives circus a dance quality.

Each year in the World of Wearable Arts extravaganza, directed by contemporary dance choreographer Malia Johnson, the lines are blurred between circus artists and dancers to create a memorable visual experience.

Many in the Circus industry are deeply committed to moving the form into new territory; away from display into artistry. Alice Capper Starr believes that the training needs to keep finding a bridge between circus and dance. She says, “I was attracted to the possibility of aerials and making dance in a three dimensional space. I also loved the extremeness of movement that is possible in the forms.” This curiosity led her to being part of Tanemahuta Gray’s epic Maui project; where many genres, including aerials, were brought together whilst retaining the integrity of Māori culture.

CircoArts founder Peter Burley believes that the future of performing arts lies in the merging of multiple skill sets - with performers who are able to dance, sing and perform high end circus acts. This is already leading to a dynamic and exciting form of physical theatre that will continue to grow and innovate as the ancient art of circus evolves.