

JOSHUA GUILLEMOT-RODGERSON

A KIWI DANCER IN NEW YORK



At age four Joshua Guillemot-Rodgerson was inspired to dance by a New Zealand soap opera; now he's about to graduate from one of the most prestigious dance institutions in the world.

BY LEAH MACLEAN

The Julliard School is one of the most regarded arts institutions in the world, with notable alumni including Ohad Naharin, Miles Davis and Robin Williams. A young Kiwi, Joshua Guillemot-Rodgerson, who was inspired to dance at four years old by a Shortland Street episode, thought his chances of making the cut were slim but come May 2017 he will be graduating from the prestigious school in dance studies. The 20-year-old Cantabrian is on the fast track to becoming the first New Zealander to graduate from the New York-based school. "I remember being really overwhelmed," Joshua recalls of his acceptance into Julliard, "and I couldn't stop smiling."

His passion and extensive involvement in dance began with tango lessons at four and then an addiction to tap dancing, which lasted nine years. "I wanted to practise all the time and get as good as possible." His dedication saw him travel to Australia and Canada, where he was encouraged to take up ballet; something that he resisted for years due to the stigma of 'boys-don't-do-ballet'.

Over time, contemporary dance found its way into Joshua's life. "I began taking a few private lessons and I quickly realised that without any ballet training it was going to be really tough. I needed a strong technical base to discover the full freedom in my dancing."

The next stage in his dance life is described as a coincidence. Joshua's mum, Dionne Guillemot-Rodgerson, who works as a boarding school director in Christchurch was doing research on schools around the world and stumbled across the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. As a boarding school, which works on an even

ratio of academic learning and training in a chosen art form, she thought this would be perfect for Joshua. After a six-week summer intensive and a struggle through the ballet portion, Joshua was offered a position in Interlochen's year round programme and at 14 Joshua made the decision to move away from home and pursue his dance dreams.

"It was the scariest decision I ever made. I knew that I would miss my family terribly, but I also knew I wanted to be a dancer and I had to make it happen. So, I took the leap of faith, all the way to the other side of the world."

After three years at Interlochen and a new-found love for ballet, Joshua was ready to seriously think about his future in the industry. After auditioning for a multitude of trainee programmes and ballet colleges, he applied to Julliard in 2012. It was a gruelling process; an all-day audition with cuts, criticism and interviews but Joshua recalls feeling contented with his effort no matter the eventual outcome, which was ultimately being offered a place.

One of the hardest parts about being a Julliard student is performing for a New York audience. "There are so many performances on any given night in New York City. The people that come to our shows have high expectations because many of them have seen the best dance from all around the world." Julliard gives 15 public dance performances a year; the busy calendar includes works by senior student choreographers, established works from contemporary repertory, and a series which features



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each class in a specially made work from a prominent choreographer. Last November, Joshua premiered his first long piece of choreography in 'ChoreoComp', a concert in which six student

choreographers collaborate with six student composers. He considers his involvement in this platform to be one of his most memorable experiences to date. He has also been involved with a group of four students from different majors who take their art forms around various facilities in New York City; such as homeless shelters, retirement villages, children's hospitals and rehabilitation centres. "Being able to share what we do with such a variety of audiences is just so unique, but more importantly it's been an experience where I have learnt so much from the people in our audiences who have shared their stories with us."

It has been intensive and with graduation looming, Joshua is beginning to contemplate his future. A given is his desire to work for a company and experience life as a professional dancer, but his ambitions do not stop there. He wishes to share his practice in a number of ways, including to one day open a school like Interlochen and to take on a role as an ambassador. "I would like to do my best to continue

normalising the concept of a male dancer. Each year I see more boys joining in, but in most schools, it's still not feasible to have a boys only class once a week." In this role, he sees himself speaking at primary and secondary schools, "I want to be proof that boys do dance and to give reasons why it's something a male shouldn't be afraid to do."

With a combination of unrelenting passion and hard work, Joshua is an inspiration for young Kiwi dancers. He stresses the importance of research; whether it's on a school, audition or company, as well as being able to communicate. "Knowing how to dance is only a small fraction of being successful as a dancer. You need to know how to present yourself and explain to others why you are passionate about what you do. Being able to communicate to other dancers, and to people who may never have seen dance in their lives – and knowing how to do this on paper can be even harder."

As he prepares for graduation and his future, he offers words of solid advice for budding dancers. "Keep having fun with it. It's too much hard work to not be enjoying it. At the end of the day it is one of the most exceptional gifts to be able to express ourselves without having to say a word." ■