

Mary Jane O'Reilly

A DANCE WONDER WOMAN

BY LEAH MACLEAN

In this article Leah Maclean looks back on the career of Mary Jane O'Reilly, 50 years on from when she joined the New Zealand School of Dance and 40 years on from the founding of Limbs Dance Company.

"Limbs was like a comet that flew across the New Zealand landscape, very quickly in 12 years; that's as long as it existed. But it was a very bright light and had a huge impact."

MARY JANE O'REILLY

Mary Jane O'Reilly still has people approaching her, exclaiming they remember her in her Limb's days. Limbs was sexy, fun and unique, and it helped fill a gap in the New Zealand dance market.

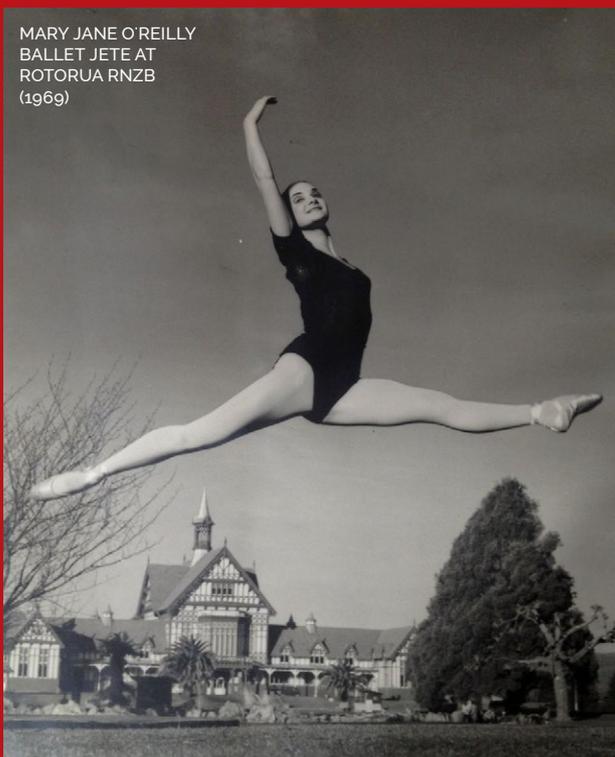
O'Reilly has had an illustrious and long career, one which she is set on continuing. She was in one of the first

New Zealand School of Dance intakes (1967), attended the Royal Ballet School (London) on a RAD scholarship, a founding member of Limbs, the choreographer for the 1990 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony, has a multitude of dance companies and performances under her belt, a Queen's Service Medal holder, and once ran a successful jeans business under the label 'Black Sheep' at the Cook Street Market in 1974/75. It's impossible to say that she has led an uninteresting life. For O'Reilly, it all started in a small village in Eastbourne, Wellington. O'Reilly's mother, who herself was a dancer, took a four-year old Mary Jane to ballet classes run by Dorothy Daniels. And so, her love for dance began, in a small Eastbourne rugby club hall, of which O'Reilly still holds very distinct memories.

The idea of celebrating 40 years of Limbs and 50 years of The New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD) is a confronting one but O'Reilly has taken the milestones in her stride. When I spoke with her in late June she was on the cusp of beginning work on the *Limbs@40* show for Tempo Dance Festival and working on a piece with her assigned NZSD student for the anniversary celebration show, *ONCE* in September. "There's such a huge world of dance now. When we were 'Limbing', there was nothing, we were the tip of no iceberg. Now the world of dance is so fantastic!"

O'Reilly's own dance practice reflects the fantastic new world in a way that she feels empowerment in reinventing herself and dabbling in different forms (burlesque anyone?). She is excited by the rise of an educated audience and the freedom it gives choreographers and dancers to explore their practice. She laughs at the idea that once upon time Limbs was a dirty word and an embarrassment in some circles, but now time has 'healed' and the legacy of Limbs is still reverberating.

There is an evolution to choreography and O'Reilly likens it to fashion. It alters according to time and context, and it varies from person to person. For O'Reilly, she thrives on the ability to reinvent herself; "At my Tempo Honouring in 2014 I was charmed when one of my dancers likened me to Madonna in the world of New Zealand contemporary dance. I like changing and doing things for a short time and then moving onto something else". But despite her



MARY JANE O'REILLY
BALLET JETE AT
ROTORUA RNZB
(1969)

love for the new and exciting, she is sure to keep a few key things in her choreographic practice; most of which are things she dates back to her days in Limbs. One of the things she talks about is creating work that carries a feminine voice.

"I'm always looking out for women," O'Reilly explains. Her burlesque show, *In Flagrante*, is a tribute to women and an oeuvre of female empowerment. "We recently took the show to Melbourne and the response we got from reviewers and young women was great, they were amazed at its relevance and what it was saying about women and sexuality," she explains. "I will always be a feminist," she says resolutely. Even 'Valhalla', the work she has developed for NZSD student, Jill Goh, rings loudly with feminism and the warrior women mystique. O'Reilly alludes to possibly using the piece, which she describes as "pop art theatre", in future in *In Flagrante*. Though, she notes slyly that it would be one of the cleaner pieces.

O'Reilly wasn't afraid to defy performance and societal norms 40 years ago and she is still not shy about breaking stereotypes and making statements; she is somewhat of a warrior woman herself and tells me she has to pinch herself to realise that she still has a dance career. She excitedly talks about her determination to develop *In Flagrante* and tour it to Canada and Australia. Plus, she has adult ballet classes which she runs at TAPAC in Western Springs. "I love ballet and I'm teaching beginners adult ballet, and ballet for experienced dancers who don't necessarily want to be ballerinas. It's my favourite class of the week, I love it!"

For this dance wonder woman, who has pursued such a timeless and diverse career in dance it seems vital to ask how she views the future of dance in New Zealand. "I think we should always see a mind at work, consider the audience and support each other."



The DANZ season of *Limbs@40*
 5-6 October, Q Theatre, Auckland

ONCE
 8-16 September, Te Whaea, Wellington
 7-8 October, Q Theatre, Auckland



MARY JANE WITCH BITCH (2012)

MARY JANE
 AT 5 YEARS
 OLD (1955)

