



SHONA'S LEGACY DANCES ON

HUNGER
DUNEDIN DANCE THEATRE, 2010
PHOTO: IAN THOMSON

BY LYNE PRINGLE

On the eve of DANZ's award to Shona Dunlop MacTavish as its inaugural honorary member, Lyne Pringle looks back on Shona's contribution to dance, and her legacy that dances on.



SHONA DUNLOP MACTAVISH

*"As I tell my dancers:
reach beyond yourself,
and the movement will
take on a life of its own.
You are a bead in the
necklace of life – string it
well – and sparkle when
the sun shines!"*

SHONA DUNLOP

When I was a little ballet dancer in my home town of Dunedin, I remember my Mum taking me to hear Shona Dunlop speak. Whilst I cannot remember the exact content of her talk, what endures is how articulate she was and what a marvellously exotic presence she had; like a vibrant tropical flower in the midst of Dunedin's dowdiness. I regret that I never took the opportunity to study with Shona during my Dunedin years – she was, I think, too far outside of the frame of my working-class upbringing in the 1960s. But I hope that a little bit of her wisdom was passed onto me when I worked with Michael Parmenter decades later; Shona was one of his first dance teachers. He like other former students, dance colleagues and people acquainted with Shona are unanimous in their perception of her as an extraordinary human with boundless joie de vivre and enthusiasm for the art of dance.

Tragedy struck the Dunlop household in Dunedin in 1935 when Shona's father died. Her 'gypsy spirited' mother took a 15-year old Shona and her artist brother to Europe, to see



SHONA DUNLOP MACTAVISH (R)
AND HILLARY NAPIER (L) 1947



MY SKIN IS BLACK,
MY SKIN IS WHITE

the ‘cultural capitals of the world’. In Vienna the young artist found a visionary teacher, Gertrud Bodenwieser, who would become her lifelong inspiration.

In an article for the *New Zealand Listener*, written by Francesca Horsley in 2004, Shona reflects on her teacher: “Bodenwieser was a truly remarkable woman. She was a great artist and a relation of Freud. All her life she’d been deeply interested in unravelling the surface to find what was really there, just as Freud did. The work she created was so meaningful, so real and so wonderful, and I guess that stayed with me”.

Taken to Europe in the 1930s, Shona trained in dance at the Vienna State Academy, and assisted her beloved professor, Gertrud Bodenwieser, Jewish like many of her dancers, to escape the tendrils of WWII. Following an extended tour of South America, Bodie, as she is known affectionately by her disciples, settled in Australia where Shona was her assistant for nine years. Bodie established a school and toured Australia and New Zealand, introducing the Antipodes to a vibrant form of European expressive dance with an emphasis on meaning and politics, combined with an emotional drive that spoke from the heart.

Following a whirlwind courtship, Shona married Canadian missionary Donald MacTavish, left the dance company and began family life in China amongst the ructions of the Communist Revolution, then moved to South Africa to confront the malignant face of apartheid. Tragedy struck once again, when her husband died suddenly and she was forced to return to Dunedin alone with three young children. In response to the adversity she faced, this remarkable woman opened her own dance studio in 1958 and by 1963 she had set up Dunedin Dance Theatre (DDT), the first contemporary dance company in New Zealand.

She continued to teach and create for close to six decades and is still actively involved in dance today. Jan Bolwell, former student and member of DDT, considers Shona’s longevity as a teacher and choreographer a key aspect of her enduring legacy. She is heralded as the ‘Grand Dame’ of New Zealand dance and Carol Brown, another former student and member of DDT, describes her as, “a Kaumatua in New Zealand, who carries a global experience of dance”. Shona remembers the high point of classes coming at the end with a 15-minute improvisation: “we were given agency to create the movement ourselves”, as well as the studio being “a counter culture space” that challenged the conservative norms of the time.

Bronwyn Judge, who has worked extensively with Shona, over many years, considers her mentor’s profound ability to interpret the emotional content of music to be one of the great gifts Shona has given her as a dancer.

Shona has written two books – *An Ecstasy of Purpose*, about her beloved Bodie and the autobiography *Leap of Faith*. She has created over 80 dances, many of them ground breaking politically; they have challenged apartheid and global hunger; argued for womens’ and gay rights; pioneered liturgical dance nationally and internationally; and explored indigenous movement as a choreographic tool. She has travelled and taught internationally, including a period of time in the Philippines as Professor of Dance at Silliman University, as well as being a dance critic for 35 years. In 1985, she was awarded an MBE and, in 2002, an honorary Doctor of Literature degree by the University of Otago.

Recently I spoke to 97-year old Shona and her daughter Terry MacTavish, who has danced in DDT and inherited her mother’s vivacity and passion for the arts. In our phone call I asked Shona if she is still dancing. “Yes of



course,” she said, “I have a little barre in the house, I do my battements and waves in the body. To use the entire body is a living statement that never seems to end.”

In October this year at Tempo Dance Festival two archival projects intersected. *LOST + FOUND (dances in exile)*, a collaboration with The New Zealand Dance Company and numerous creatives under the artistic directorship of Carol Brown was a project that seeks to bring awareness

to Bodenwieser’s work and the precariousness of her legacy. The second project was the Limbs Dance Company Retrospective, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of this iconic New Zealand dance company. Chloe Klein described a moment where the audience for the former work were high up in the lighting rig whilst the dancers for the latter were warming up on stage: “There is a sense of significant and complex layers overlapping within Q’s walls as young people embody and reanimate pieces of New Zealand contemporary dance history, from Bodenwieser to Limbs. In this moment Q is a living and transient museum”.

The last words must go to Shona herself in this excerpt from her honorary degree acceptance speech.

“I have danced in many countries and many strange venues. In bull arenas, hospitals, theatres, prisons, city squares, gypsy caves, vast cathedrals and tiny chapels, at prestigious conferences, with isolated tribal people, and on-board ships. I have danced at Thai Buddhist séances, by the shores of Galilee and the gates of Damascus. I have danced for celebration and I have danced for revolution. As a heroine of mine, Isadora Duncan, declared “A free spirit can live only in a freed body!” I feel sorry for those who have never experienced what the power dance gives to stimulate the body and fire the mind in one act – to draw people of diverse cultures and backgrounds together and to give an insight into the mind of God.” ■



HUNGER - DUNEDIN DANCE THEATRE, 2010



HUNGER - BIAFRA, 1970