



THE GEOGRAPHY OF AN ARCHIPELAGO, LUMINA  
PHOTO: CAROLINE BINDON



BY FRANCESCA HORSLEY

# THE NEW ZEALAND DANCE COMPANY FROM VISION TO FRUITION

In just four years, The New Zealand Dance Company (NZDC) has established itself as a powerhouse in New Zealand contemporary dance. A well-researched business plan and a clear vision have been the company's strategy for its success. In this article chief executive and artistic director of NZDC, Shona McCullagh, discusses the considerable achievements of those four years – both artistically and administratively – and the company's plans for the future.

Since its establishment in August 2012, NZDC has produced three acclaimed seasons, *The Language of Living*, *Rotunda* and *Lumina*. All toured nationally, with *Rotunda* and *Lumina* presenting in Europe, and *Rotunda* also touring Australia – all resoundingly acclaimed. When we spoke in late April the company was about to take *Lumina* on a North Island tour, all the while in the midst of running their Autumn seasonal school for young dancers, “literally from Invercargill to Kaitaia”. Also in the mix were preparations for their fourth season, *The Absurdity of Humanity*, with works by Ross McCormack and Lina Limosani, premiering in Auckland in August. Future planning includes a full-length work by Michael Parmenter; it is full on – at any one time they can be working on up to seven productions.

A well thought out infrastructure has supported the fast growth and depth of the company. Shona says, “From the very outset we crystallised the strategic plan into achieving the ‘four Bs’ which were a board, a brand, some bucks and



NZDC IN REHEARSAL FOR LUMINA  
PHOTOS: JOHN MCDERMOTT

a building. In a way all we have really done is stuck to the plan with the help of a huge number of people who agreed that there was a need for a company”.

The NZDC has established three tiers of choreographers – emerging, mid and established. This year they are piloting an emerging choreographers’ programme, which Shona says has been very rewarding and successful. “The idea is to give them good resources which is primarily time – and a solid mentoring process throughout the creation of the work.”

Their youth and community engagement is also impressive – they run four seasonal schools a year, including the annual summer school in Tauranga. They also have a senior engagement programme, and when on tour deliver a series of private sector and school workshops.

“You can imagine the amount of work that goes into every national tour – it is phenomenal. We are not skimming the surface. We are not expecting to just rock into town and perform and leave and believe that is enough to build an audience. We know that it is very important to create real relationships with people on the ground and for those to become long term connections.”

She says the cost of taking the work to the small communities is “phenomenal – each national tour costs us about half a million dollars. It is nowhere near profitable. We take touring very seriously – it is a really vital part of our contribution to the dance sector”.

Shona says an important goal is achieving high production values for NZDC audiences. “Instead of contemporary dance being the thing where you don’t expect to have much set design, we really wanted to treat audiences to very high quality in terms of the set, costume and light design – and live music whenever we can possibly afford it.” Rotunda was accompanied by a live brass band; Lumina’s focus was on light.

Part of her strategy is to participate in international collaborations both here and overseas. “We are very interested in bringing new voices and influences into the country. One of the most exciting things was the international co-production with the Holland Dance Festival – which saw us returning for the second time in consecutive festivals. It was hugely thrilling for me to take Malia Johnston’s and Louise Potiki Bryant’s works to Europe – they hadn’t been seen there before and that is a great honour and a great service we can offer the NZ dance industry – the ability to take NZ choreographic works offshore.”

Guest choreographer, American Dutch-born Stephen Shropshire who choreographed *The Geography of an Archipelago* for the Lumina programme, really challenged the dancers. “He didn’t allow any of their personal perceived limitations to inhibit the vision that he had – and of course the dancers stepped up enormously and are now very proud of the work they have done. It has improved their technical skills enormously.”

NZDC LUMINA IN NEUSS / PHOTO: CAROLINE BINDON



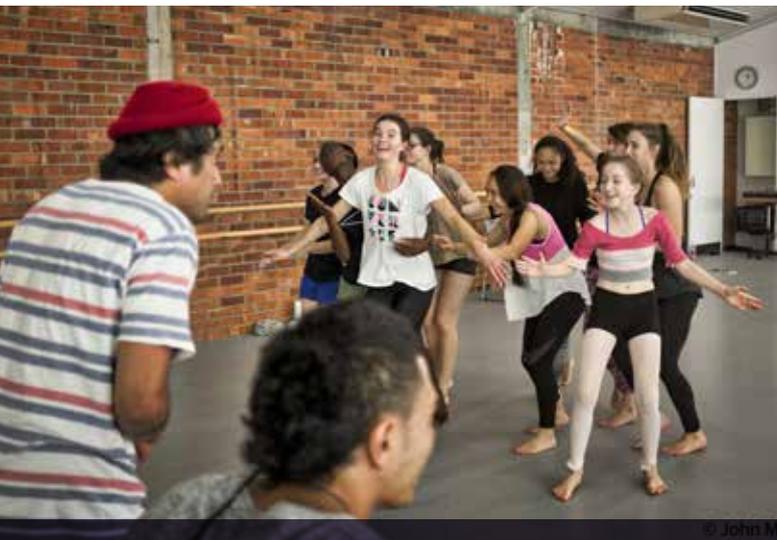
“So we are looking at further international collaborations – not just with choreographers but with light designers, set designers – and hopefully being a feeding ground for some fresh fusions on creative talent.”

A big part of NZDC’s mandate is the commitment to full-time employment for dancers which includes benefits such as holiday pay and sick pay; benefits that contemporary dancers often don’t receive. Last year they offered two 12 month contracts, this year four. The remaining four dancers in the company are on ten month contracts. The aim is to incrementally increase the number of permanent contracts that are offered. They also try very hard not to lay off a dancer with just a week’s gap between one project and another and take responsibility to ensure that they have continuous employment.

Shona says, “One of the most exciting things for me is seeing the actual results of full time work in terms of the rapidity of development of dancers. This was something I knew experientially from my time in Limbs. By working full time, doing class and dancing every day, of course you are going to get better, faster”.

Part of the Shona’s vision was to have a permanent home which would generate an exchange of ideas and shape the company’s identity. “I guess the astonishing arc was that by January 2014 we moved into this home, the Wellesley Studios. I always felt a home for a company was extremely important – not just a home, but a world-class home, and with the enormous and generous support of Katrina Todd we have eye-rubbingly achieved what we set out to do.”

“Katrina Todd has made a significant difference to the landscape. We have had all sorts of companies working there and that is really healthy. One of the difficulties of the project paradigm is that people are working in isolation, and it is tough finding funding, tough selling, finding the right dancers. Just by dint of working in the same building and sitting eating lunch together is wonderful. We all have a responsibility to be part of a community and try to help each other.” ■



▲ NZDC AUTUMN SCHOOL 2016 / PHOTO: JOHN MCDERMOTT

▼ NZDC IN REHEARSAL FOR LUMINA / PHOTO: JOHN MCDERMOTT



# Matter – Between Poles and a Plinth

Ross McCormack talks about objects. Boxes, rocks, stones, tables – and in this particular case, poles and a plinth. It is the very early stages of the new work, *Matter* he is choreographing for The New Zealand Dance Company (NZDC). At the time of speaking he has had one workshop with the dancers, but his head and sketchbook are full of images that are the starting point for his creation.

He will share the season, *The Absurdity of Humanity*, described as NZDC's most cutting edge season to date, with Australian choreographer Lina Limosani. It will premiere in August in Auckland.

Ross says creating an environment, the texture and set is always his starting point. "I love objects – I have a history of working in an environment." For example with *Triumphs* he was inspired by a table, in *Age* it was a box, in *Area* it was heavy rocks. "There is always a key object – it is a different approach that works for me, it is another way of thinking about dance."

Ross was awarded the Creative New Zealand Choreographic Fellowship for 2016, and a key component was research into set realisation. "Quite often it is a really important part of the process that is left to last, or is very rushed, or is the least important part of the budget."

He says once the environment is established, dancers are placed within it to give it place. The objects gain meaning from the construction of the work itself. "I was reading about the monolith in the Planet of the Apes and how they find this solid object that seems to travel through time. I am fascinated by people bestowing huge importance and almost mythological or religious cathartic experiences to benign objects."

For work with NZDC, Ross was inspired by an exhibition by Belgium artist, Berlinde De Bruyckere, who used poles to hoist her works of art. "I love her work, but I had a fascination with the hoisting of the prop used to elevate the work. I am going a bit further with that."

"These poles in the new work indicate a totem. They will take on a new look. They may separate two areas, like two floors, or look like the foundations of something, or hoisting two separate surfaces apart. They might look like totem poles, or a forest. Every time I have drawn them they are bit different." ■



PHOTO: JOHN McDERMOTT

*The Absurdity of Humanity*  
The New Zealand Dance Company  
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