

# THE BALANCE of the BALLET

After nine years of balancing the company's books and delivering on a management pathway, sadly, Amanda Skoog is leaving the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Before she left for her new job in Britain, Francesca Horsley asked her about the challenges the last nine years have delivered, what she is most proud of and what is her secret to keeping a small national ballet company thriving in the 21st century?

BY FRANCESCA HORSLEY



CINDERELLA BY CHRISTOPHER HAMPSON - 2007  
PHOTO: MAARTEN HOLL

new and challenging repertoire, and tours both here and internationally. "Success lies with feeding the dancers exciting repertoire. If dancers have good work, they perform better. You need to give them opportunities to perform, a number of performances, international opportunities and career development."

"If you can get the balance right between regional touring, doing works for the New Zealand public, performing overseas to internationally benchmark yourself; that is when the company is at its best. We do our best work when our outputs are high."

One of the hallmarks of RNZB, in which Amanda takes considerable pride, is the much loved *Tutus on Tour* seasons, which travels the length and breadth of New Zealand. "The RNZB loves touring. People want us and we sell out," she says. Not only does it give small centre audiences the opportunity to see quality productions, the tours challenge the dancers. The cast gets more performance opportunities, and allows younger dancers to come through. "The dancers are elite athletes and if we didn't tour New Zealand, we would have to find another way of giving them that level of work to sustain them."

But Amanda says the hard reality is that these tours are not cost effective as the smaller venues cannot provide enough box office returns to recoup outgoings. Nevertheless the company is committed to *Tutus* and they are developing a different touring model to spread the costs over two years.

The economic realities of the *Tutus* tours, is also evident in the cost of delivering top productions to the comparatively small, city-centred New Zealand market as a whole. "You need to offer your audiences exceptional, extraordinary experiences, so they come back. This way you grow your local audiences, these then support you through sponsorship, and are loyal both as audiences and as



This year's magical *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB) wowed audiences up and down the country. The dancing, choreography, set and costumes charmed from the moment the curtain went up. New Zealanders could take considerable pride in this masterpiece production.

Underneath all that talent and beauty, lay the unromantic taskmasters of securing money, developing strategy and hardnosed business acumen. Doing an outstanding job in delivering these ultimatums has been RNZB general manager, Amanda Skoog.

Amanda said the absolute first goal of any dance company was taking care of the dancers with a combination of



SOLDIER'S MASS BY JIRI KYLIAN, SALUTE - 2015  
PHOTO: ELLIE RICHARDS

financial supporters. It is about feeding it at an artistic end and then everything else follows. It is an ever-increasing circle. Not going the other way. As soon as you cut and compromise, the dancers feel it, the audience start to feel it, and then you are in a hiding to nowhere.”

It was now essential for smaller ballet companies to find financial models to share these costs. Amanda is proud of the co-production arrangement the RNZB established with the Queensland Ballet to mount *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. “It allowed us to put on a production of that standard because we are sharing the costs with another company. This is the future model; it has to be, because we have got to save money wherever we can. We are competing with international products, so our shows have to get better, and produce really good work. But that costs more. If we can find other partners, and halve the costs, then that is absolutely the way forward.”

Amanda says a real threat to the Ballet's economic health is the increasing amount of international tours that saturate the local market. “The challenge is how does the Ballet compete with these big, international acts? There is not only the Russian ballet, international musicals, but also the Auckland and Wellington international festivals. When I first joined the company we had one international Russian ballet coming through with *Swan Lake*. I hate to imagine how many international acts we have had this year.” And while the company is delighted to be part of the *Auckland Arts Festival* and *NZ Festival* this year, “you still have got that competition whether you are part of the festival or not”.

She is in no doubt that the RNZB punches above its weight, and internationally it is their point of difference that is important. “People are always surprised because they are not sure what to expect, especially when we are doing the mixed-bill programmes.”

The programme which toured to Europe this November took works by New Zealanders Neil Jeremia and Andrew Simmons. “It is wonderful to give them a voice overseas. But we will also be doing a work by Javier de Frutos and a piece by Andonis Foniadakis; works that haven't been seen in London.” She would also love the *Midsummer* production to travel to UK because “Liam (Scarlett) is from the UK and I think one of the reasons that work was so successful was because it was created on this company.”

Supporting and growing local choreographers has been a focus, and Amanda is extremely proud of the *Salute* programme this year. “It gives New Zealand an international voice now that it is going offshore. However, one of the issues for the RNZB is finding choreographers who can come in and work. Whilst we have, you could argue, more resources than a lot of smaller dance companies, the choreographers still have to produce something accessible for our audiences. So it's about finding people who can work at that level and understand what needs to go on stage. We had Daniel Belton in the *Allegro* season, and then Neil and Andrew for *Salute*. It is about bringing people through within the company – people like Loughlan Prior - to produce work.”

That is another reason why a *Tutus* tour, *Leaps and Sounds* short works programme or choreographic workshops are important. “That is where Andrew Simmons started. It is really important because you can't just put a choreographer in a room and say this is great because it is a New Zealander and think it is going to work. The process is much more complicated than that.”

Amanda is also proud of the work she has done raising the profile of the company. “When I stopped dancing, I went into education and community outreach work, and this is what the RNZB offers to schools, for dancers, and for communities. The work we do for budding professional dancers coming through is of a very high standard now

and is consistent around the country. The work we do in schools, to support the national curriculum, is fantastic around resources, NCEA, and primary schools. The community work involves community classes, meeting choreographers, through to watching the dancers warm up. It is a comprehensive programme and is delivered at a very high level. I feel thrilled about that.”

“Social media, Facebook, the TV3 series *The Secret Lives of Dancers*, the work we do in libraries – there is a huge amount that goes on behind the scenes that keeps on feeding that whole awareness that New Zealand has a great national dance company.”

The key to all this success is the need to balance the books. “Money is always a challenge in an environment where there is a lot of product in a very small market. Our expenses continue to go up - touring, theatre, ticketing costs.”

The Ballet is directly funded by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, which provides 40% of the annual budget, with the balance coming from fundraising and box office. Amanda says the RNZB does exceptionally well with its fundraising. “We are the most successful arts company in the country, but sponsorship is a very tough ask – we are all going after the same money. We are raising now well over \$3–4 million through corporate trusts and foundations, individual giving, and donations. I have team of seven people who do that, but it is a big pressure.”

She says that there is still money in the bank “but I wish there was a little bit more. We need to increase our baseline government funding. The ballet company hasn’t had an increase for seven years”.

Amanda is happy she is leaving the RNZB in good heart, as she joins her husband in Europe. “I am very proud of where we are at. We are only a small company but you can make it work, if you are clever about it. I love them to bits – it has been an honour and a joy. I think it is an extraordinary company.” ■

## RNZB to perform Europe’s world class choreographers

BY FRANCESCA HORSLEY

World class contemporary ballet choreographers will make up Royal New Zealand Ballet artistic director Francesco Ventriglia’s inaugural season in February 2016.

Beginning what Francesco says will be an “exciting year”, the mixed-bill, *Speed of Light*, will include works by William Forsyth, Alexander Ekman and Andonis Foniadakis.

“I am happy to bring these three choreographers to New Zealand in my first programme. All three are geniuses and it will be the first occasion to see William Forsyth here.” Forsyth will be showing *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, a great work originally commissioned by Rudolf Nureyev for the Paris Opera Ballet. “He is internationally renowned, and New Zealanders need the opportunity to see him. I want to give Kiwi audiences the chance to see this great work,” Francesco says.

At the forefront of the present line-up of talented young ballet choreographers, Swede Alexander Ekman will present *Cacti*, supported by the New Zealand String Quartet. Ekman’s works are described as fast-paced, with witty, subversive humour and clever transitions. *Cacti* has taken the world by storm since its premiere in 2010.

Also on the mixed-bill is Andonis Foniadakis’s work *Selon désir*. Francesco says Foniadakis is regarded as one of Europe’s most dynamic choreographers. “He has produced works for companies around the world, including the former American company, Cedar Lake.”

“Art translates what is happening in the world, so these works need to come to New Zealand. We have talented ballet dancers in the RNZB, and they can dance these works. I am sure the public here is ready to see these new generation choreographers.”

Amanda Skoog, outgoing RNZB general manager says that “the programme is fantastic for our dancers, and it will be Francesco making his mark and showing his taste for the company.”

*Speed of Light* will feature in the NZ Festival in Wellington, the Auckland Arts Festival, and then tour to Christchurch and Dunedin.

Also in the 2016 RNZB year is a world premiere, *The Wizard of Oz*, created by Francesco. Originally made for Maggio Danza in Florence in 2010, it sadly never reached opening night. Now with some additional touches, six years later, Dorothy and her journey through Oz will be brought to life. The work is set to music by Francis Poulenc, with sets and costumes by Italian designer Gianluca Falaschi.

Francesco is adamant that the RNZB should include innovation and tradition, and both contemporary and classical works should be in any year’s programme. To round off the year, former artistic director Ethan Stiefel’s acclaimed *Giselle* returns for the end of year season. ■



RNZB 2016, SHANE URTON  
PHOTO: ROSS BROWN

# rnzb

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THE RYMAN HEALTHCARE SEASON OF  
**THE WIZARD OF OZ**

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