

No bullying in dance, please!

Bullying in the work place has been a hot topic in the media in recent months. DANZ takes the opportunity to examine this issue in the dance world by checking in with some of our stakeholders.

One of DANZ's key commitments is to encourage best practice in the sector – this is one of the central topics in a new initiative called The Change Strategy, which has been in place through 2015 and will continue onto 2017. DANZ has published: a *Code of Ethics* which covers studios or projects, teachers and students; a *Code of Professional Practice for New Zealand Dancers*; and a *Code of Professional Practice for New Zealand Choreographers*. In the near future DANZ will publish a *Code of Conduct for Companies*.

Recently Chris Jannides, senior movement tutor at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School has started a blog called *pitstopdance*. His purpose was “to open up more serious dialogue around performance and dance”. His first post was called *No Bullying in Dance, Please* and he wrote an article about the illegalities and consequences of bullying in the dance industry.

In his article he defines bullying as: Under common law and the Employment Relations Act 2000, an employer must not “destroy or seriously damage” a relationship of “trust, confidence and fair dealing” towards employees, and is required “to take reasonable steps to protect employees from harm”.

Chris is concerned that the industry is largely silent on this issue and this can be seen as being complicit with unscrupulous professional practice. This can lead to practitioners who are afraid to challenge bullying behaviour because they believe being outspoken will jeopardise their careers.

DANZ viewed the publishing of this blog as an opportunity to gather a reaction from various practitioners, by posing a series of questions about the article.

How prevalent is bullying in our industry?

Turid Revfeim, former ballet mistress of the Royal New Zealand Ballet, states: “I think it is great that this has been brought up, as I believe bullying is all too prevalent in the dance world and needs to be addressed.”

A leading New Zealand choreographer, in an email response, queried: “I would suggest that a better question would be does it exist at all? If the answer is ‘yes’, then that is not good enough . . . let’s be more honest about what’s actually not acceptable – and call a spade a spade . . . [intolerance of bullying makes] common sense for the majority of people, but somehow [in dance] this behaviour sneaks through the cracks . . .”

Marian McDermott, who has run her own dance school on Auckland’s North Shore for the last twenty years, is no stranger to the wrath that can come from the industry if a person speaks out against bullying. In 2000 she was quoted in the New Zealand Herald on her stance against unprofessional practice in the dance sector. Her thoughts were even published in newspapers in Britain. In a recent telephone conversation she recounts: “I was completely ostracised for speaking out by the private sector dance community, which was ironic . . . in essence I was being bullied for taking a stand against a practice that was far too rigorous for young students.”

Marian believes unsound practice in the private sector has improved in recent years. All members of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) receive a copy of the Code of Conduct for their organisations, which set out the standards of conduct and professional practice expected and required.

How do we find the line between toughness/artistic rigour and bullying?

Tessa Mitchell responded on the *pitstopdance* blog: “It seems, especially in dance, that it is not uncommon to hear talk of the toughness [that comes] from choreographers and a brutality . . . So I guess there is a line that can be crossed . . . When does it become bullying or just a toughness? It seems so many come very close to crossing that line at least”.

According to the New Zealand choreographer quoted earlier: “Dancing and creating dance can be tough and it needs disciplined individuals and groups to make it work. This is a fact and should be encouraged . . . However, I would suggest there is a line where toughness and bullying get blurred by different individuals. It can come down to how people are managed, spoken to and what the expectations of a project or a performance are.”

It is important that all parties enter into well-prepared contracts and they clearly define expectations in terms of working conditions and protocols. DANZ has several resources on the website covering contracts.

What checks and balances are there in the dance industry to ensure it doesn't happen and what do we need in place to make the situation better if it is indeed a problem?

Turid Revfeim says: “It would be great if some guidelines or advisory information could be established and made available for dancers, directors and choreographers – alongside publications that already exist as protection within employment law in NZ.”

Practitioners can refer to the DANZ Codes of Conduct mentioned above as guidelines for best practice.

Our New Zealand choreographer believes that: “Communication is so vital and key to getting things on track in any organisation or process. It's possibly not a one-size-fits-all solution, but sensible management of this should be relatively easy to achieve through simple processes and good communication. We are an arts community and should be leaders and at the forefront of our ability to deal with issues like bullying, sexism, discrimination of ANY kind, not trailing behind other industries or communities in our thinking and practices. I would love to see our performing arts community become one that doesn't tolerate it [discrimination] at all, that we can be diligent and organised about our ways of dealing with difficulties. This would have an amazing effect on people's confidence and energy to then put towards good creation and development of the art form.”

Please contact DANZ in confidence for advice about bullying. ■

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WorkSafe New Zealand, on its website, provides some very useful resources and guidelines on bullying in the workplace. It defines workplace bullying as “repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety”:

- **Repeated behaviour** is persistent and can involve a range of actions over time.
- **Unreasonable behaviour** means actions that a reasonable person in the same circumstances would see as unreasonable. It includes victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person.

If bullying occurs, find out what your internal policies are and follow them, alternatively use the flow chart below.

Note: When discussing your issue refer to the behaviour, rather than using the word 'bullying'.



For the Codes of Practice resources go to the Resources section of the DANZ website: www.danz.org.nz/dance+info and filter on Codes of Practice.

For the full article by Chris Jannides, go to: pitstopdance.com. This also includes a list of resources about bullying.

For more resources and guidelines on preventing bullying go to: www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/tools-resources/bullying-prevention-tools

¹ MBIE = Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
² EAP = Employment Assistance Programme