

# CARRIE RAE CUNNINGHAM DANCE QUEEN

BY FRANCESCA HORSLEY



TEMPO 2006 AT TAPAC  
PHOTO: ROWENA BAINES

Tempo Dance Festival, is undergoing change with new leadership and management with an interest in broadening audience and programming. Francesca Horsley updates us on it's growth and vision.



It is no exaggeration to say that Carrie Rae Cunningham is a dance magnet. Such is her passion and energy for dance that you can't fail to be swept along with her enthusiasm and charm.

But beneath her lilting Tennessee accent and her infectious laugh is a very discerning and experienced arts administrator – and the new artistic director of Auckland's Dance Festival, *Tempo*.

While she took up her position in May, she is no stranger to the festival beginning as a copywriter in 2008. "I came in when Mary Jane (O'Reilly) was artistic director," Carrie Rae says. "I was completing my masters in Dance Studies at Auckland University, and when Mary Jane mentioned that she was looking for someone to write the descriptions for the programme I said 'yeah – I can do it'. I began in May and then just never left basically."

Having served in a number of roles with *Tempo*, she took over as producer two years ago, working with the then festival director, Celia Walmsley.

Carrie Rae says she is hugely indebted to Celia, who made the transition as smooth as possible. "As Celia knew she was leaving she was very good at going – 'ok this is actually going to be your festival that you have to deliver, so let's work together and make it happen for everyone'."

"Celia had great systems – I have learned so much from her; her knowledge, experience and expertise, the way of looking at budgets in a different way and how they inform programming. I like to plan the festival artistically with what I like and what I think will be good, but also I have that knowledge of saying: "can we actually make this work or am I going to send the festival into bankruptcy?"

Nevertheless Carrie Rae has added "some things that we haven't done before, looking at ways we can get more participation from our audiences other than buying tickets. I want to create a festival vibe, I draw attention to Q Theatre".

"The idea is to broaden out the audience slightly, to include things that you wouldn't really consider typically dance. I am looking to include dance theatre, really camp music theatre, contemporary works, experimental dance, comedy, visual art."

Auckland's dance scene is multi-dimensional. Carrie Rae says, "It is incredibly diverse, not just in genre but there are choreographers and dance artists who are working in a multi-disciplinary/cross disciplinary way. Lots of people are using video and film, making their own films because technology is not expensive anymore and is very accessible. There is a lot of spoken word, the use of text. Choreographers and dancers are creating and composing their own music. As these different disciplines and elements advance and evolve their own practice they filter out and seep into other arts forms. This is why I think that *Tempo* is so important to the dance community. It brings it all together and showcases it".

Carrie Rae came to dance in her late teens, working hard to catch up with technique during her dance studies at University of Memphis, Tennessee. While dipping in and out of choreography and dance, working in production and direction has been a constant thread.

Auckland's *Tempo Dance Festival* is now 12 years old, with its origin the *Auckland Dance Festival* beginning in 1998 in the Auckland Town Hall. In 2006/07 it moved to the newly opened TAPAC in Western Springs, which provided a secure venue for the Festival to grow.

However there was only one theatre with a relatively small stage. Larger companies wishing to be part of the Festival performed in bigger venues and *Tempo* would umbrella them. Likewise some experimental works were staged off-site. "There were lots of shows all around the city and pretty much *Tempo* took up the entire month of October. This led to confusion as to what or wasn't a *Tempo* event."

She says the shift to Q Theatre in Auckland's Queen Street in 2011 allowed for a consolidation of the Festival into two weeks under the one venue. It also necessitated a more structured approach to composition as all shows were performed in the more conventional setting under the proscenium arch. Carrie Rae says some artists found this a bit stifling.

Nevertheless with the on-going success of the Festival in Q, Carrie Rae is in a more secure position to explore more alternative approaches. "I want to do something outside of the theatre setting." The Festival this year will be a mix of popular shows such as *Fresh*, *Y Chromosome* and *Out of the Box*, as well as some surprises.

The management team at *Tempo* has expanded to three with the appointment of former Royal New Zealand Ballet dancer and experienced arts manager, Brendan Meek as general manager, and dancer and choreographer Jessie McCall as producer. Both bring their knowledge of dance and "know-how of inner-workings of business spreadsheets" to temper artistic yearnings.

Without doubt, *Tempo* is in good hands. Carrie Rae says: "I love watching dance, I love watching theatre, live performance. There is real fulfilment in going to those performances and I am hugely inspired by the amount of work being created by choreographers and dancers, and dance artists of every level of experience."

So, grab yer coats and go! ■



NZ SCHOOL OF DANCE, TEMPO 2011 AT Q



TEMPO 2010 AT TAPAC  
PHOTO: KATHRIN SIMON

**TEMPO DANCE FESTIVAL**  
**30 SEP - 18 OCT**  
**Q Theatre, Auckland**  
[www.tempo.co.nz](http://www.tempo.co.nz)