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PHOTO: NETHASHA ABEYSINGHE



# DANCING "NOW" IN NEW ZEALAND

BY TAWANDA MANYIMO

A detailed insight into the diverse dance communities that help shape the varied and distinctive dance community of Aotearoa. Through research and interviews, this article explores the vibrant dance expressions that are currently taking place in New Zealand.

*"Kana uchikwanisa kutaura unoyimba, kanauchikwanisa kufamba unotamba."  
"If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing"*

## ZIMBABWEAN PROVERB

New Zealand is one of the world's most diverse nations and in its most populous city, Auckland, you do not have to go far to experience a range of dance expressions and the diversity that it encompasses.

Community, culture and a sense of belonging lie at the root of the driving force that compels people to be dance performers – and this is evident in the surge of contemporary dance from New Zealand's thriving ethnic communities.

Cindy Jang is the founder of Korean dance company, Jang Huddle. Born in South Korea, she migrated to New Zealand at the age of five and has recently had her first choreographic work, *Iron Eyes* (see review on page 12), open at the Basement.

"It is a story about my grandmother and her life in North Korea, but at the same time it is my story because the roots are passed down," she says. "I'm trying to investigate my

own culture because even though I have a Korean heritage I feel I am a New Zealander."

Jang explores the complexities of intersecting cultures, through a highly immersive dance work and her company's principles reflect those dynamics.

"My work is based on my philosophy of oneness and not being ashamed of where I'm from," she explains. "Sometimes when I tell people my grandparents are North Korean, I get negative reactions and that's the purpose of works such as *Iron Eyes* – to combat those misconceptions."

Women-led initiatives are not uncommon among the contemporary dance scene and Gaelle Nkomo is another pioneer. Nkomo has never undertaken any formal dance training, but she has a lifetime experience of dancing. Through dance, she explains, "there is a passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next, this ensures that culture and tradition are not lost".

Held in high esteem in the Congolese community, Nkomo has been a key figure in developing these performances. "I hold a lot of the knowledge of the traditional Congolese dance and I see it as my duty to pass this on to the younger ones. Dance also allows young people to come out of their shell, and it's a beautiful and rewarding thing for me. It also has a positive impact on them as second-generation migrants and it is important work that we do in the community – it sows the seeds for future change," says Nkomo.

Like Cindy and Gaelle, Kaviesha Abeysinghe also has a similar passion for dance and is a strong believer that culture is contemporary, no matter where you go. She is the founder of a Sri-Lankan dance group called Thun Thala. The Sri Lankan community in Auckland is also increasing and a number of different events are run regularly in the city.

"We have been performing since 2010 when we arrived in New Zealand. This is a way of sharing our Sri Lankan culture and showing what we have learnt. We love to share our talent and get great feedback."

However, all three women, who are leading figures in their respective communities, confess there are a number of challenges.

Resources and recognition as professionals is a regular feature, as is the conflation of community dance with pro bono efforts. Abeysinghe explains: "Even though we get invited to events, there is often a cost associated for us and as artists we don't make money from it, even though our troupe perform regularly around Auckland."

Similarly, for Nkomo, the importance of community backing and support, especially from parents, is essential to ensuring that these opportunities are maximised: "The challenges we face is having everyone committed on the same level, sometimes, because we work with teenagers, it is hard if the parents are not so involved."

Jang, having received university training and support from a wider group is aware of the role that different communities have in developing New Zealand's contemporary dance landscape. "Through the process

of making a dance piece, we focus on inclusion and especially embracing second generation cultures," she says. "Unless you are Tangata Whenua we are all immigrant people. Dance allows us to share our common humanity – and through different styles and forms we are creating an opportunity to tell Korean stories." Jang adds, "I wanted to broaden the spectrum of dance, so I am always looking to cast Asian or different ethnic dancers in my work".

The work of Cindy Jang, Gabrielle Nkomo and Kaviesha Abeysinghe all reflect different approaches to sustaining and developing their respective dance stories in New Zealand. The dance landscape of New Zealand may appear to be dominated by mainstage companies, those with the ability to tour and those with funding, but it is worth remembering that New Zealand's backyard community is brimming with diversity across our dance language and form and this is where the seeds of New Zealand's future contemporary dance will be born. ■

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