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CHILTON BALLET ACADEMY

NEW DIRECTIONS IN DANCE TRAINING

For teenage dancers and their parents there's often a tension between the desire for more intensive dance training and the importance of an academic education. Jenny Stevenson explores some solutions offered in New Zealand.

BY JENNY STEVENSON

During the last decade there has been a major shift in the training of young dancers who wish to make a career in dance - due in no small part to the launching of the Dance Curriculum and the introduction of NCEA Dance. The potential benefits of these qualifications have been embraced by many private school educators who have come to appreciate that readying pre-professional dancers for their future career is akin to the sort of intensive specialised training usually reserved for elite young athletes. Several of these schools are giving students the leeway to undertake comprehensive training as an integral part of their education. It constitutes recognition of kinaesthetic skill, which dance-education specialist, the late Linda Ashley referred to as "physical Intellect"¹.

In addition, many New Zealand dance studios have found novel ways to enable promising young dancers to combine concentrated dance training with their required academic study. The options range from receiving home-schooling or studying through Te Aho

o Te Kura Pounamu: The Correspondence School (Te Kura) while attending full-time dance classes or making arrangements with schools for time off to study dance during the school day.

Russian dance teachers have always understood the benefits of intensive training at an early age. However, an article by Maya Krylova on website *Russia Beyond*² goes so far as to talk of children sacrificing "their childhood in order to become ballet dancers" and talks of how "The harsh curriculum (which consists of a full school load, plus daily ballet practice, as well as special subjects...leaves no time for the kids to be kids".

The practice in New Zealand would appear to be more moderate. Chilton Ballet Academy under the directorship of Bronwyn Bennett has operated out of Chilton St James School since 2017 and allows students (Year 10 onwards) to "allocate half of their day to dance" while studying for Cambridge International Examinations in the other half.

¹ Ashley, Linda. "Shape Shifting: Examining Choreographic Process in Dance Education." *ACE Papers*, no. 13 (July 2003).

² Krylova, Maya. "Sacrificing Childhood to Ballet." *Russia Beyond*, February 14, 2013. https://www.rbth.com/society/2013/02/14/agonny_and_ecstasy_on_the_road_to_ballet_stardom_22869.html (accessed February 25, 2019).

Graduates from Chilton Ballet Academy have had great success entering tertiary dance training with some students being offered up to five different places in overseas schools.

PARENT-TESTIMONIALS ARE FULSOME, WITH ONE PARENT DESCRIBING HOW “IT HELPED REMOVE A GREAT DEAL OF STRESS FROM OUR LIVES KNOWING THAT OUR DAUGHTER WAS RECEIVING BOTH WORLD CLASS DANCE AND ACADEMIC TRAINING”.

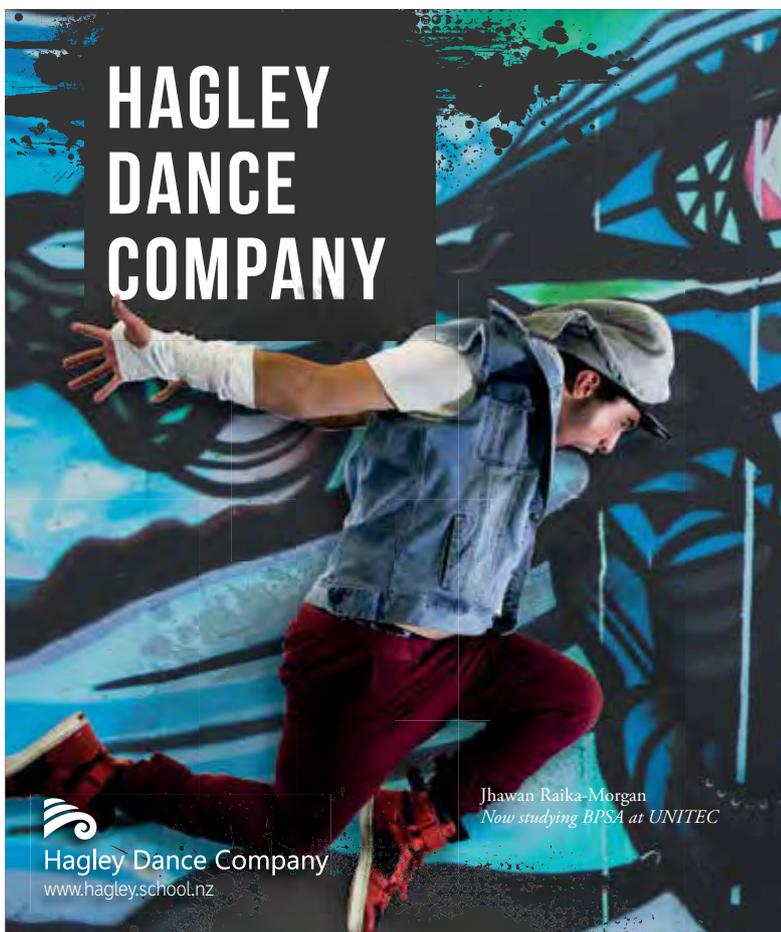
Bennett believes that the programme “has seen students love of school grow” and she cites such student feedback as: “That year was so life changing for me and I grew as a person and as an artist in ways I didn’t know I could”.

In a similar vein, Geordan Wilcox, Head of Dance at Saint Kentigern College, has devised an Extension Dance programme for Years 11-13, which gives students nine periods of dance during the school day over a seven-day cycle. This is offered in conjunction with the school’s Academy of Dance. Students on the Extension programme can attend extra Academy classes before and after school and also on Saturdays where they can receive one-on-one coaching.

Wilcox says Extension graduates are very successful in being accepted into tertiary training. He tells of how one young man who first started training as a dancer in Year 11 was subsequently accepted into the New Zealand School of Dance and is now dancing with a prominent New Zealand contemporary dance company. Wilcox says, “Many of our students dance at studios outside of school as well”. He believes there is “pressure for many young students to leave school to go into full-time dance training programmes at an early age” and that the course provides “an opportunity for students to have extended hours of dance during their school day and still...have a school education”.

In Christchurch, the St Andrew’s College Ballet Academy under the direction of Dr Carolyn Cairns “is the only school in New Zealand to provide a co-educational integrated Ballet programme on campus... which encompasses the entire school”. At a senior level, Ballet Academy students take four dance classes each week and an extension class of Dance Pilates.

New Zealand private dance studios are also embracing the concept of intensive part-time training offered in conjunction with school work. Melinda Palmer of Mt Eden Ballet Academy has established the Future Dancers Programme, a ballet-based course “designed to be a transition between after school training and full-time training”. The course runs for two and a half days a week “but students can choose to do a part of this...depending on how they can work it around school



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THE PALACE DANCE STUDIO



THE PALACE DANCE STUDIO



PHOTO: LILY CARTWRIGHT

LILY COOKE, CANTERBURY BALLET

work," she says. Those students either "fit training in with regular school" or "do correspondence school work through Te Kura".

Palmer has also initiated a Petit Dancer course for promising younger students from 11 years of age. It is for three hours on a Thursday afternoon and "is designed for younger dancers showing potential who would like to strengthen and improve their basic technique".

In Christchurch, Taisia Missevich, Artistic Director of Canterbury Ballet, Aotearoa National Dance Institute, has partnered with Ao Tawhiti "a special character state school with a fundamental tenet that the child is central in directing his or her own learning". Students can attend Canterbury Ballet's full-time course from nine years of age. They undertake the Prosillio Academic programme and the school uses the American Ballet Theatre National Training Curriculum which "embraces sound ballet principles and incorporates elements of the French, Italian and Russian schools of training".

To date this educational pathway has worked well and in 2017 "Prosillio students up to Year 10 made greater gains in literacy and numeracy than the average New Zealand student," says Prosillio Programme Coordinator, Natalie Woods.

Also in Christchurch, the Anneliese Gilbert Academy offers a part-time Transition Programme "for gifted Classical Ballet and Contemporary Dance students" who "with the permission of their academic school are invited to attend the full-time programme". Students attend one or two days a week and on Saturdays, enabling them to study a range of dance subjects alongside the dancers on AGA's full-time Classical or Contemporary Dance courses.

Auckland's The Palace Dance Studio has recently been granted NZQA registered Private Training Establishment status and is currently working towards offering its first year-long full-time course in April 2019 - a Level 4 Certificate with a focus on Hip Hop. In the meantime, since October 2018 The Palace Dance Academy of Dance has partnered with the Gateway and STAR Government training initiatives to offer concentrated block course training towards achieving 26 credits for NCEA Levels 1-3 in Hip Hop, "their favourite type of dance", says academic manager Bethan Collings. These block courses are offered either for two weeks in the school holidays, or one day a week for ten weeks during term time.

PALACE DIRECTOR PARRIS GOEBEL WAS MOTIVATED TO START THIS TYPE OF TRAINING BECAUSE "WHEN SHE WAS IN SCHOOL, SHE WISHES SHE KNEW THEN WHAT SHE KNOWS NOW ABOUT ALL THE DIFFERENT JOBS THAT ARE ON OFFER IN THE INDUSTRY", SAYS COLLINGS.

It is her hope that by undertaking this training "students will have that 'lightbulb' moment and realise they can study or do further training in these areas when they leave school". ■