



Tū Move Tū New Zealand School of Dance

TOA PARANIHI – TŪ MOVE 2013 PHOTO: STEPHEN ACOURT

BY LEAH MACLEAN

Leah Maclean explores what it is like for two hip hop dancers to take their dance to another level and place.

When we walk into the New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD) studio, Taylor Swift is blasting over the loud speakers. Guest tutor and ex NZSD student, James Vu Anh Pham of Chunky Move, is directing first year students to paint the horizon with their bodies, a popular motif within Contemporary Dance.

To the untrained eye it looks like a mess of flailing limbs and floor grinding but listening to Pham and seeing the concentration on the faces of his entranced students it turns into a range of controlled, specific movements.

Connor Masseurs and Toa Paranihi, both 18, linger near the back of the studio working hard to follow Pham's sinuous movements. They appear to fit in perfectly well with the rest of the class; it's almost impossible to tell that these two boys are entering Contemporary Dance with a background in Hip Hop. And according to Toa, Contemporary Dance isn't "as stink" as he thought it was.

When the lesson ends introductions are made and despite being worked to the bone both physically and mentally the boys are in high spirits. It's not just sweat oozing from their pores but positivity and good humour. They tell me that I'm there to make them "sound cool", but I'm already convinced that they don't need me to do that.

Having been dancing for ten years, Connor credits his choice to his mother who, like all good parents, was eager to see her son succeed. She got him involved in all sorts of extra-curricular activities which influenced his willingness to try new things including Hip Hop classes when he was eight; something he admits he hasn't stopped since.

Toa, much like Connor, was introduced to the world of dance almost ten years ago when a crew of break dancers visited his primary school. "I just thought, whoa, I want to do that." So naturally, he took the opportunity to pick up classes, which he attended once a week and soon realised the potential of dance.

The boys, thick as thieves after going through every major dance checkpoint together now find themselves training as first year students in the NZSD Contemporary Dance programme. This poses an interesting question, given the perceived division between Hip Hop and Contemporary Dance, what was it that drew these boys in?

"The truth is I was here for Toi Whakaari's [NZ Drama School] open week," Connor explains bashfully. Realising he had come on a day the school didn't have any open classes he decided to take a self-guided tour of the Te Whaea campus, which is home to both the national dance and drama centres. Coincidentally Toa was in one of the dance studios engaging in the *Tū Move* dance programme

for young Māori and Pacific Island men. “When I got up to the first dance studio I saw Toa in there and he just told me to come in.”

Tū Move opened up a whole other realm of dance and transitioned the boys into NZSD. “*Tū Move* left me wanting more in terms of discovery. I was fascinated by what I could progress with in terms of my body and my thinking overall,” says Toa. And what about the appeal of Contemporary Dance next to their roots in Hip Hop? Connor admits to taking delight in knowing nothing. “I find it exciting to be a rookie because there’s so much to learn that in this space you know you’re going to come out as a better dancer.”

It’s no secret that securing a career in the industry isn’t an easy task. With this in mind both boys explain that up until recently it hadn’t really been on the cards. Like many young Kiwi lads Toa was determined to get through high school and had his sights set on a rugby career. It wasn’t until he graduated high school and started at NZSD that he realised how much the dance world had to offer. This has to be one of the most endearing things about these boys, their humble bafflement at the extent of the dance industry. Connor found himself on the same wavelength: “It is quite a hard industry. And it seems the only way to get famous is the internet, especially in a Hip Hop direction, and that’s purely chance. But it wasn’t until I found myself in this school, did I actually start believing it could happen rather than leave it to chance.”

Connor and Toa recognise NZSD as playing an important role in their life, first with *Tū Move* introducing and transitioning them into the school’s processes, then opening them up to another level of dance both mentally and physically. “Everything they say is new,” explains Toa, again showing that eager attitude.

NZSD is one of the Southern Hemisphere’s most prestigious dance institutions with an admirable pool of national and international tutors, renowned for their quality of work. So, how have the boys found this well-regarded environment? “Being surrounded by people who are better than you, it’s a gift and a curse. You have something to strive for and everyone’s a role model,” says Toa, to which Connor agrees, “The environment is really set by the fact that the second and third years don’t segregate themselves from us. And as they have been here longer, you do look up to them”.

Sitting in on James Pham’s class you get a sense of the support the students and tutors provide for each other. Positivity and willingness exudes from everyone, it’s refreshing to see especially given the industry’s competitive nature. “NZSD is challenging, exciting and inviting,” Toa describes. “Everybody accepts the fact that we can’t touch our toes, we’re not segregated because of our ability. Everyone is there to help each other and feed off each other’s energy. It’s not like we’re all trying to be the best, we’re all trying to make it together.”

There is so much for Connor and Toa to learn and there is no hiding their excitement. They joke about flexibility being something they’re looking forward to the most. “By next week,” Toa says mock-seriously in regard to how soon

“You stereotype it [Contemporary Dance] when you’re not part of it.”

TOA PARANIHI

CONNOR MASSEURS (CENTRE), NZSD INSIGHT STUDIO PERFORMANCE
PHOTO: STEPHEN ACOURT



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Thanks to DANZ for providing support and Stephen A'Court for photography

he wants to achieve that goal. “With Helen’s class you might,” Connor responds. But joking aside it’s progression that the boys are eager for and that hunger is influenced by the quality of their peers and tutors. “We are exposed to so much variety, and not just teachers or tutors, but dancers who have gone through what we’re going through now. It’s crazy to see where it’s taken them,” explains Toa. “This whole three year process at the school is just a learning springboard into the industry. It’s cool to just take it all in,” says Connor. “I find everything exciting.”

The amount of awe and respect that these boys have for the industry is encouraging. Their willingness and spirit is insurmountable. How many Hip Hop dancers do you know take the plunge into Contemporary Dance, unitards and all? Connor and Toa are positive role models for young dancers with the best advice any dancer can give another; just dance. Toa elaborates, “Once you get past that vulnerability barrier, it just opens up so much. Obviously everyone’s scared to try something new but it’s so beneficial.” On that note I asked them where they see themselves in the future. Toa confesses he doesn’t really have a plan in terms of dance, but that’s okay because he seems content to be going through the motions of life as is. And Connor? As far as he’s concerned as long as you’re dancing, you’re doing it. ■

Congratulations!

In the process of writing this article the 2015 Street Dance NZ Championships were held in Auckland. The boys’ crew The Associates were among those that qualified for the world finals being held in San Diego in August. Connor also took away the award for Most Outstanding Male Dancer of 2015. Congratulations boys! What a way to bridge the division between Hip Hop and Contemporary Dance.



THE ASSOCIATES
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