

The New Zealand Dance Company Winter School
Photo: Katie Rudd



Reaching Out

By Dr Linda Ashley

This article explores the development of outreach projects and their significance for NZ dance development.

Outreach projects are an integral part of dance company activities both here and overseas. In this article, I present an overview of and some thoughts about the benefits of outreach activities from three dance companies and some of their young participants: Okareka Dance Company (Taiaroa Royal, TR); Touch Compass Dance Company (Catherine Chappell, CC); and New Zealand Dance Company (Community and Education Programme Administrator, Katie Rudd, KR).

Okareka's inaugural Summer School was in 2012. They involve Years 12 and 13 secondary students who have a passion for dance and are thinking about carrying their studies onto tertiary level. Learning contemporary, ballet, jazz/hip hop, M&B (Muscle & Bone fitness class), choreography and drama over two weeks: "They get to experience how intense full-time dance training can be" (TR). Culminating with an informal showing, the students perform for family and friends. Tutors include freelance experts and performers plus past Summer School students who are now in full-time training. Okareka recruit through

secondary school networks, via their website and word of mouth. Fees were \$200 in 2012/13 and \$300 in 2014. "In 2013 we secured private funding from a South Auckland donor because we had eight students from there enrolled" (TR).

Touch Compass have been providing outreach for eight years, and include contact improvisation, repertoire, creating movement, plus extra options of music or aerial work. They promote programmes through dance and disability networks, and try to keep the fees low to make them accessible for dancers. Some people with a disability have to pay for taxis to and from each session so fees can be negotiable. "Sometimes if we have enough grants we can make them free. Fees can cause issues. Participants can also use their respite care hours to pay for class fees" (CC).

"Since 2012, The New Zealand Dance Company (NZDC) have connected the elite with the street through annual workshops and master classes from Invercargill to Whangarei" (KR). YEP! (Youth Engagement Programme) was first held in January

2013 at UNITEC, running alongside a Professional Devising Workshop led by guest tutors from Chicago based company Lucky Plush. It included contemporary dance and acting classes with two guest choreographers creating works on the participants. In 2014, a Summer School in Tauranga and the first Winter School in the new Wellesley Studios in Auckland drew dancers from across the North Island. Four classes a day over six days included classical ballet, contemporary/partnering, repertoire, choreography and street dance with tutors Michael Parmenter, Sherilyn Kennedy, Allister Salaivao, Marianne Schultz and Katie Rudd, and live accompaniment from pianist John Gibson and saxophonist Jeff Henderson. NZDC advertise extensively throughout the country, on their website, in private sector dance schools, high school dance programmes and school newsletters. Winter School fees are \$375 for the juniors and \$390 for seniors, with cheaper early bird options. Whenever possible, NZDC endeavour to help students travelling over distances, including arranging billets to reduce accommodation costs. Connecting with local high school teachers can help talented dancers to attend. "In some cases these teachers were able to allocate funds from their budget to cover part or all of the cost of the week" (KR). There are two subsidised scholarships (reducing the fee to \$150), and dancers in need can apply for one fully paid scholarship by writing about why they love dance and why they are interested in attending.

All three companies welcome young dancers with a wide range of ability and experience including those with classical ballet training, high school dance education or experience in street dance. "NZDC believes in fostering dance talent in a nurturing, non-hierarchical learning environment. Often, they see the Company perform and are inspired to participate" (KR). The companies are encouraging enjoyment and expanding comfort zones, whilst challenging young dancers.

Jag Popham, from Okareka's 2013 Summer School, now a first year contemporary dance major at NZSD: "Coming to the Okareka Summer School I discovered the teachers held us with such uncommon respect, they didn't stand above us lecturing, but with us, drawing out of each person their own stories and helping each person realise

their story had equal value. With Okareka you're in a safe place where you can experiment, fail and succeed."

The main benefit that the companies identified was inspiring young dancers to continue their tertiary training and enter into employment as dancers in their own company or in the industry generally. "From the three years we now have students attending both New Zealand School of Dance and UNITEC's Performing and Screen Arts courses with the first lot of students graduating from UNITEC at the end of this year" (TR). Catherine Chappell noted that: "Touch Compass values opportunities to develop our art form, professionally develop company dancers, recruit new dancers, and train future company members, especially for young aspiring disabled dancers."

Leah Hickey, participant with Touch Compass: "This class is for everyone and anyone, it extends you both physically and personally as you learn to explore different ways of using your body in dance form. Definitely out of my comfort zone, but nonetheless has been an absolutely awesome experience."

Katie Rudd described how: "Providing insight into our passion for the contemporary dance world and



Okareka Dance Company Summer School
Photo: Rachael Penman

performing, and sharing our knowledge and skills has many benefits for NZDC. Forming wonderful personal connections with dance teachers and parents, witnessing dancers learn and grow in confidence, skills and creativity is very rewarding and sustains dance for the future.” Other benefits identified by NZDC included increasing a greater audience of supporters, building positive relationships with private sector dance schools, and increasing profile for the company.

Charvel Matiu, 16 years, New Plymouth: “During the week of the Winter School [with NZDC], I learnt a lot about myself in the time that I was with you such as techniques, discipline and more body awareness. I felt that it was important for me to attend the Winter School because I have never really been in a dance school before and I knew it would be an amazing opportunity for me to experience. It was like a dream come true because I have always dreamed of attending a dance school. I am not a trained ballet or contemporary dancer but this Winter School of Dance really helped me in developing my own style of dance. I wanted to attend this Winter School because I wanted to see what it was like to be in a dance company and to see if this is where I want to be in the future.”

Stephanie Watson: “The Okareka Summer School is a great environment to dig deeper down into yourself. The atmosphere created allows you to feel encouraged by the tutors and your classmates - who become good friends - to discover different ways of moving your body and/or develop the ways you already move. I really enjoyed this aspect of the Summer School as I could unlock potential I had and use it to the best of my ability. I loved the Okareka Summer School, it's a great way to spend the summer!”

Teaching and learning new skills, being a part of a group, making new connections with like-minded people, enhancing enjoyment and motivating young dancers to consider dance as a career are just some of the many mutual benefits that dance companies and young dancers share from reaching out to each other. ■

Touch Compass
Photo: Kathrin Simon

