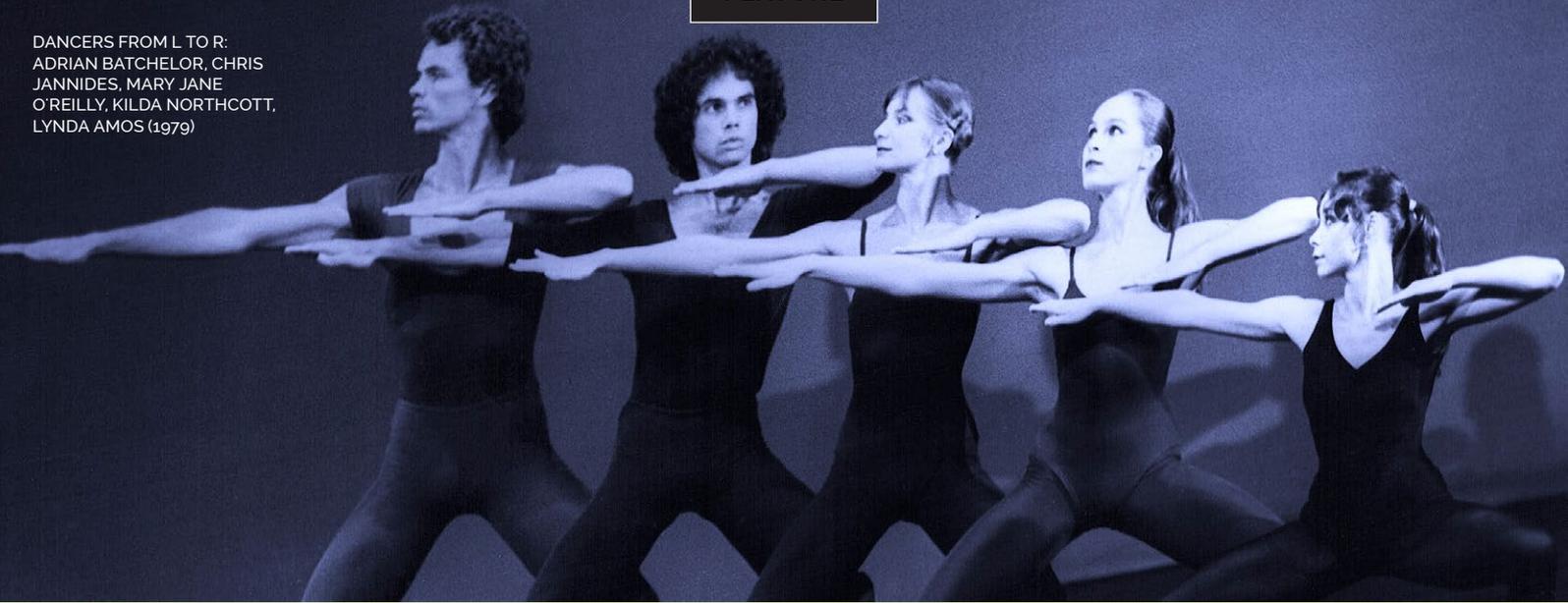


DANCERS FROM L TO R:  
ADRIAN BATCHELOR, CHRIS  
JANNIDES, MARY JANE  
O'REILLY, KILDA NORTHCOTT,  
LYNDA AMOS (1979)



# In Conversation with Chris Jannides

The 40th anniversary of the founding of pioneering contemporary dance company Limbs, in June 1977, is a significant milestone for dance in Aotearoa. In this article, Anton Carter talks to Chris Jannides founding dancer, choreographer and artistic director who formed Limbs Dance Company with a small group of friends.

## When did you become interested or aware of dance?

I was in an amateur theatre company when I was a young adult and overheard some women talking about their children doing creative dance. This sparked a memory of having done it at primary school and loving it. So, I went to check it out, except on the night I went they weren't dancing, they were watching films of professional modern dance companies from overseas. I was instantly converted. This was in 1975, I was 21.



CHRIS JANNIDES

## What were some of your first experiences of dance?

I started with recreational classes in creative dance, jazz, folk, classical ballet. Modern dance was scarce and I could only find one teacher to begin with. Eventually two other styles of modern dance became available. Susan Jordan with Graham technique and shortly after, Mary Jane O'Reilly offered Cunningham training. Auckland had a professional ballet company run by Russell Kerr. He allowed outsiders into company classes. Although I was a total beginner, it was so inspirational being in the midst of this kind of professional dance environment.

## Who were your early influences of dance?

A Paul Taylor documentary had the strongest effect on me. I remember Alwin Nikolais' multimedia work, some stuff about butoh and footage of Martha Graham. That was the extent of my awareness of international modern dance. Locally, Jamie Bull in Wellington started Impulse Dance Theatre, whose work set a new benchmark and standard. Some visiting dance graduates from an American university called Dance Gallery had an impact on me in the areas of technique, improvisation and composition.

## What motivated or inspired you to form a company?

Susan Jordan started a modern dance company in Auckland called Movement Theatre for which I was a founding member. From that experience, I created an



STANDING FROM L TO R: ADRIAN BATCHELOR, KILDA NORTHCOTT, PHIL O'REILLY (LIMBS GRAPHIC DESIGNER), SARAH HANCOCK (1ST BUSINESS MANAGER), LYNDA AMOS, CHRIS JANNIDES, FRONT: MARY JANE O'REILLY (1979)



ON LEFT: JULIE DUNNINGHAM AND ADRIAN BATCHELOR  
ON RIGHT: MARY JANE O'REILLY  
BACK: KILDA NORTHCOTT (1978)

independent performance featuring a number of small dance items interspersed with humorous nonsense poems. Pop music and dancers speaking were innovations I was testing. It was this first experiment that kick-started Limbs and its highly eclectic repertoire.

**Did you have any idea about forming and running a company?**

Not at the start. Movement Theatre made me aware of key things about how a small dance group operates: programming, performing, choreographing, rehearsing, teaching, etc. But when I left, I didn't immediately think, 'Oh, I want to create my own company'. That first independent performance was going to be a one-off. Because of its success, however, we decided to keep going. The way Limbs took off after that was totally unexpected and caught us all by surprise.

**How difficult was it in the beginning to form a company and develop your own work?**

In retrospect, it seems as though it was easy. We were lucky because the right group of people were in the right place at the right time. After that it was like a roller coaster continually running ahead of itself. We performed in schools, campuses, teacher training colleges, theatres, universities, cafeterias, parks, pubs, fashion shows, prisons, rock festivals, TV, anywhere and everywhere; but always in response to increasing invitations. We quickly amassed a large audience and their enjoyment and support encouraged us to continue experimenting and growing.

**What was your focus as the artistic director?**

My responsibilities, as one of the artistic directors, were repertoire and programming, developing new work from within the company, choosing dancers, as well as being in control of our overall artistic philosophy and vision.

**In the early days how was Limbs received by the public?**

Right from the start, audiences were enthusiastic, unbelievably so. When we began, we really didn't know what we were making. It wasn't until we saw ourselves through the eyes of audiences and reviewers that we really got to know who we were as artists.

**What impact do you think Limbs had on other artists and other art forms at the time?**

We frequently interacted with practitioners from other disciplines - pop, classical, experimental musicians; theatre artists; designers; visual artists; film makers. We featured on the cover of Art New Zealand. The impact Limbs had on New Zealand's wider cultural community was substantial.

LIMBS AT PALMERSTON NORTH, CHRIS JANNIDES & MARK BALDWIN (1978)





LIMBS AT NAMBASSA, ON THE CHILDREN'S STAGE (1980)

BACK FROM L TO R: MARY JANE O'REILLY, SHONA WILSON, CHRIS JANNIDES, ADRIAN BATCHELOR  
FRONT FROM L TO R: KILDA NORTHCOTT, LYNDA AMOS, DEBRA MCCULLOCH (1980)



### You left the company in 1980. Was it hard to leave the company at the time and what were some of the reasons for leaving?

For me, it was devastating. The working dynamic was that we were a collective. Decisions were made democratically. The turning point for me was the company's first overseas tour to the US. I was becoming concerned that we were losing the grass roots community that had got us to where we were. I proposed that I not go to the States and instead start an apprentice company, one that would accept all the schools and community work that we were no longer doing. The proposal was not taken up. Other things were also complicating my thoughts and impressions of what we were becoming, particularly our increased commercialisation and always having to deliver a 'Limbs' product. So, I decided it was best for me to leave. Of course, one of the best things that came out of that for the company, and for New Zealand dance, was that Douglas Wright replaced me.

### What were some of the highlights for you being a member of Limbs?

The fun that I often had in performance. Working and performing with such talented personalities. The anarchic freedom on stage, particularly moments of improvisation in the work. Connecting with audiences and surprising them. The games we played with them and with each other. The entry Limbs gave us into so many different sectors of the community, here and in Australia, and across all boundaries and walks of life. The personal growth this enabled us as young people and artists was incredible. Performing to 30,000 people at Nambassa.

### How do you think Limbs influenced contemporary dance in New Zealand?

We popularised it, professionalised it, put it on the map and gave it a distinct New Zealand flavour.

We legitimised having a career in contemporary dance, launching practitioners who went on to prominence, both here and overseas. We broke barriers of elitism and inaccessibility that surrounded our art form. We became a force for innovation in contemporary performance. Limbs provided strong role models for male dancers, allowing them to successfully enter, influence and lead the profession alongside women. The popularity of our public classes, through the performing arts school that survived it, produced New Zealand's first bachelor's degree in contemporary dance. Dance graduates today in our tertiary education system embody our legacy and influence in their training.

### How would you describe the current state of dance in New Zealand?

Diverse, vibrant, competent, world class, but also insular, institutionalised, vision-less, formulaic, divided. Standards of choreographic crafting and the technical levels of dancers are very high. But it bothers me that the distance between the privileged few and the under-resourced many is too big.

### Looking back now, 40 years on, what are you most proud of?

That Limbs enriched our cultural heritage and made our dance whakapapa so unique. This is worth acknowledging and celebrating. ■

**The DANZ season of Limbs@40  
5-6 October, Auckland**

## PREVIEW

### Limbs Dance Company: Dance For All People 1977-1989

Through photographs, interviews, and reviews, *Limbs Dance Company: Dance For All People 1977-1989* tells the story of Limbs, from their first public performance in Auckland in May 1977, to the last shows in Wellington in the winter of 1989.

In January 1977, a group of young artists met at the Rongomaraeroa Marae in the Hawkes Bay settlement of Porangahau, convened by Gaylene Sciascia, to 'share, talk, dream...hoping to put dance first and individual egos second'. Bathed in sunlight and lashed by wind, the dancers dreamed of contributing to the 'dynamic, spiritual, creative growth of dance in Aotearoa' over ten days of classes, rehearsals, swims, late-night food and korero.

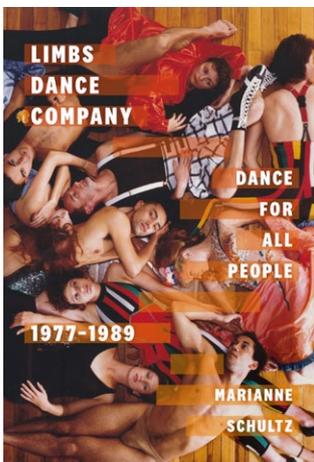
Forty years later, the legacy of that unique gathering is evident in the plethora of dance made in New Zealand across a range of genres, techniques and cultures. Notably, one of New Zealand's most influential popular performing arts group of the 20th century, Limbs Dance Company, emerged from this idyllic summer gathering. Ranging from comic, short dances such as *Watch It Buddy*, to the 70-minute *Now is the Hour*, the works described in *Limbs Dance Company: Dance For All People 1977-1989* tell the story of New Zealand growing from adolescence to adulthood.

With the advent of Limbs in 1977, the language of movement in New Zealand changed inextricably, expanding and exploding the definition of dance from this small South Pacific nation. Fundamentally, the founding members of Limbs believed that dance could reflect common human issues and emotions and was capable of touching people from all walks of life. With this belief, they made dances that were simultaneously relevant, challenging, sexy, serious, fun and exciting. These core beliefs and means of expression continued over 12 years as new artistic directors, choreographers, dancers and management upheld the passion and innovation of the founding members of Limbs.

Limbs dances both reflected and shaped the zeitgeist of 1970-1980s New Zealand. Such a wide array of dances

not only entertained and excited the general public, but also inspired other choreographers and artists from different fields to explore their own artistic voices.

Spanning years of political protests and economic reforms, the works that Limbs presented in this time period and their performance settings – large music festivals, prisons and opera houses – reflect the changing nature of New Zealand society. This unique history is a record of New Zealand seen through the lens of dance. ■



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## GIVEAWAY

DANZ has one copy of the book to giveaway. Email [danz@danz.org.nz](mailto:danz@danz.org.nz) by **29 September** to go into the draw.

You must be a member to enter the draw. If you are not a member, join DANZ before the closing date and you will automatically be entered into the draw.

## PREVIEW

### TEMPO Dance Festival

New Zealand's only professional dance festival returns to Auckland for its 14th year of envelope-pushing artistry, with a season of shows from 4 to 15 October. 2017 is a year for milestones in dance and Tempo Dance Festival 2017 is celebrating with special events for Limbs Dance Company, The New Zealand School of Dance and Northern Dance Network, alongside works featuring emerging choreographers and established artists.

In celebration of the 40th anniversary of the formation of New Zealand's first ever contemporary dance company, The DANZ Season of *Limbs@40* features choreography by Mary Jane O'Reilly, Mark Baldwin and Douglas Wright performed by current tertiary dance students.

*ORCHIDS* is a striking new choreography by Sarah Foster-Sproull featuring seven distinct dancers, including former Limbs member Marianne Schultz, and explores the complex female spirit.

Tempo Dance Festival offers unique opportunities to highlight innovative and dynamic artists. Louise Potiki Bryant (2017 Tuakana artist) performs *NGARO*, made in collaboration with composer Paddy Free and artist Rona Ngahua Osborne and depicting the "often faceless journey of all too many living with mental health issues". Performance artist, dancer and poet Jahra Rager Wasasala returns home direct from New York to present a new full length solo work, '*a world, with your wound in it*', which will cement her as one of New Zealand's most exciting and innovative multi-disciplinary artists.

The New Zealand School of Dance marks its 50th birthday with *ONCE* – a collection of 10 solo works created by graduates from five decades of the school and performed by current students.

Malia Johnston and Momentum Productions break new hip hop ground with *CUDO*, a show unlike anything audiences have seen before – melding liquid, acrobatic and robotic hip hop against a backdrop of real time graphic visuals, manipulated by the dancers themselves and performed by members of world-renowned hip hop crew Identity Dance Company, alongside the Cesan brothers and Matthew Moore, all with live music.

Java Dance Theatre presents two works in the programme – *Dirt and Other Delicious Ingredients* for children, and for adults, *The Wine Project*. ■

TEMPO DANCE FESTIVAL  
4-15 OCTOBER, AUCKLAND  
[WWW.TEMPO.CO.NZ](http://WWW.TEMPO.CO.NZ)

