

VALUING DIVERSITY, CELEBRATING MULTICULTURALISM AND FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTION THROUGH DANCE

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International Dance Day is celebrated globally on 29 April. Here, organisers and participants speak about Wellington's event. How sharing their dance cultures weaves together people from many genres and communities on one day each year.

“AT THE BEGINNING THERE WAS MOVEMENT.”

In her opening statement from this year's International Dance Day message, Karima Mansour (Egyptian dancer, choreographer and educator) reminds us that as humans our need to connect through movement and dance is universal and enduring,

“In this day and age where connection and connectivity have taken on new meanings and where we are at our lowest point in our ability to connect... Dance remains to be the most sought-after action to help us re-establish that lost connection.”

This ability to connect people is what makes Wellington's International Dance Day (IDD) not only relevant, but a vehicle for social change.

In 2000, YouthDance Education Trust (YET) was established by a group of Wellingtonians committed to increasing access to dance. Since 2001 we have

produced an annual community event to celebrate IDD with a wide variety of free dance workshops and performances.

Inspired by the core values set out by UNESCO, the intention of this event has not only been to celebrate dance, but also to bring people together through the common language of dance, crossing age, gender, physical ability, political, cultural and ethnic barriers. Jenny Bloomfield, from the Moringa Dancers, commented on what she values about the event:

“It is a celebration of multiculturalism, unity, and dancing. I love that so many people from all over the place are there together, trying out new styles of dance, having new experiences, and being open to the world and each other in a different way than they would be every day.”



DANCE WARM-UP WITH LALA SIMPSON, IDD 2018



SCOTTISH CEILIDH WITH VICTORIA UNIVERSITY FOLK MUSIC CLUB, IDD 2019



PHOTO: GARSIDE IMAGING

WELLINGTON INTEGRATED DANCE, IDD 2017



PHOTO: GARSIDE IMAGING

AUDIENCE JOINS KOFFIE FUGAH, IDD 2019 FINALE

Over the past 19 years, IDD in Wellington has showcased more than 90 dance genres and cultural dances, provided over 200 workshops and given performance opportunities to more than 200 groups, who have performed to over 12,000 spectators.

This year alone, over 1,500 people joined in dance workshops and performances ranging from West African dance to Samoan Sasa, Jazz to Scottish ceilidh.

For a number of years, IDD has been held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Workshops take place in open public spaces, including the main foyer, with the public encouraged to 'have-a-go' at a wide range of accessible dance styles. Many people come across the event while visiting the Museum and feel enticed to join in. Trustee Gill Clark observed,

“WE SEE STRANGERS OF ALL AGES AND BACKGROUNDS ENGAGING THROUGH EYE CONTACT, HELPING EACH OTHER, SMILING, HOLDING HANDS; THEY GET TO EXPERIENCE A CONNECTION THAT CUTS THROUGH DIFFERENCE, SEPARATION, AND ISOLATION. THIS BRINGS AN AWARENESS THAT WE ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM EACH OTHER”.

Including people with different physical abilities is also a central tenet of IDD. Diane Eaglesome, from Touch Compass Dance Company, who took part in 2018, commented, “For the community to see inclusive dance is of huge benefit; to view people who have disabilities as equals. This has a knock-on effect in the work place, in schools and life in general. For children who may or may not have a disability, it is an education in itself”. Regular attendee and Wellington Integrated Dance performer Trish McQueen simply states, “When I dance I forget I have a disability”.

In the last decade the Trust’s emphasis has been on representing not only a diversity of dance styles but also reflecting Wellington’s cultural diversity. The opportunity to participate in dance has historically been within social and cultural circles, often behind closed doors in studios, or at events focused on a particular style of dance. IDD brings dance out into the public arena where it truly is for everybody to join in, to share, to feel welcome, to express themselves through movement.

But none of these words get to the heart of what IDD celebrations in Wellington are about. To quote Karima Mansour again,

“DANCE IS A HEALER. DANCE IS WHERE HUMANITY CAN MEET”.

This was powerfully demonstrated after the finale at this year’s performance. To close the show, West African tutor Koffie Fugah got the whole audience up on their feet dancing, but people didn’t want it to end and a spontaneous circle formed on stage with the drummers starting up again. A moment of connection occurred when a performer led a hesitant young woman into the circle, the smile as she grooved onstage was magical. As more people joined in, there was an incredible shared energy, joy, acceptance of difference, and encouragement. These people might not have gone up to talk to one another, but here they were connected through dance.

The video of that 15 minutes demonstrates the power of IDD as a vehicle for social change, with no need for words! You can find a sample on our Facebook page – @InternationalDanceDayWellington.

As the Trust approaches its 20th International Dance Day in Wellington, we seek to evaluate the impact of this annual event, and look at ways we can further strengthen social connection and celebrate our differences through dance. Follow us on Facebook to see what we are planning for our exciting 20-year celebrations. ■