

Big sticks – masters and apprentices

Dr Katrina Rank, Manager of Education and Training, Ausdance Victoria, outlines the guidelines developed in Australia to support effective and safe dance practice in schools and communities

Dance teachers are dance leaders. They affect a generation of young bodies and minds and can inspire those under their care to great things. So what makes an inspiring teacher and what is his/her antithesis? How has training changed and what is being done to ensure that all dance teachers know their responsibilities?

Once there was a time when the passing of skills in the dance trade was done solely through master-apprentice arrangements: post-professional dancers directing and training aspiring dancers who reverently and uncritically lapped up every word and action. The higher the professional rank (i.e. principal) the more prestigious the connection, the more revered the training. This form of knowledge transfer assumed that the master had achieved high status by discovering the ‘secrets of dance’ for technical perfection, longevity and artistic freedom. In most cases, the master reinstated the system of training s/he had undertaken as a student and applied this generically to all their students. That the system worked is unquestionable and is proven by the number of great dancers it has produced. Those students who did not succeed as dancers were seen to have the wrong bodies, attitude or artistry. In short, they were not perceived as talented enough. This may have been sound thinking in the 19th century but will no longer do.

We now enter a new paradigm where the dancer is not a silent recipient of instruction but a whole person with individual needs. This change is influenced by several decades of research, sector appraisal and directions taken in mainstream education.

We can trace the beginnings of the change in Australia to 1977 with the founding of Ausdance, then the Australian Association for Dance Education. It provided a united voice for dance in Australia and brought dance professionals together to consult, form networks and to plan strategic advocacy for dance in our country. One of the earliest tasks was to develop the Dance Industry Code of Ethics (1987) (1) which guided studio principals and teachers in the behaviours expected of them by the public and their colleagues. Interestingly the ethics included, possibly a little ahead of its time, the following point: ‘Individual teachers should recognise the role of dance in the

development of the whole person. They should also seek to recognise and develop each student’s potential, whether it lies in dance or in related fields.’ We were beginning to understand that the way we treated our dancers had a major impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. We noticed that dancers needed to be considered individually, not generically, and we were looking for ways to avoid collateral damage.

The next decade saw several important initiatives including the development of the Australian Guidelines for Dance Teachers (1994-5) and the Australian Standards for Dance Teachers (The Interim Competency Standards) (1998) (2). These guidelines and standards were effectively divided into three sections: teaching methods, safe dance practice and professional and ethical issues. In the late 1990s the Australian education landscape shifted further and training courses previously taught in schools became the domain of ‘vocational education’. Within this context, the standards were written as three ‘units of competency’ and placed within a community and recreation training package.

Any standards written by the industry are always valuable, and mark the principles and concerns of the times and people who produced them, but their value increases when coupled with research such as the Safe Dance Reports 1, 2 and 3 (1990-98) (3). Commissioned by Ausdance National, edited by Hilary Trotter and written by Tony Geeves and Debra Cookshanks, these reports showed that many young dancers were seriously injured or on their way to acquiring chronic injuries before they had even entered the professional dance arena. They showed that professional dancers had significantly short careers due to the detrimental way injuries were prevented, treated and rehabilitated. The studies introduced the concept of ‘safe dance’ practice and suggested alignment to the newly developing field of sports medicine.

“Please give me the name of a school or teacher who can teach my talented two-year old and make her the ballerina I know her to be.” Believe it or not, Ausdance branches across Australia receive at least one of these phone calls a week. The parent wants ‘the best’ to manage and direct the precocious and mindboggling talents of the children. While we provide advice and a registry of schools

Right: Katrina Rank (flower in her hair), Dance Across the Domains conference 2010. Photo: Belinda Strodder

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and locations via our website, we find ourselves in a difficult position when it comes to recommendations. Many schools are Ausdance members, so we aim to avoid favouritism and empower students to make their own choices. Besides, if you haven't observed a teacher in practice, how can you recommend them?

Outside mainstream schooling and dance training provided by societies, there is no compulsory accreditation or registration for Australian dance teachers. In the community and social dance sector (as well as some of the primary and secondary schools where dance is delivered by 'specialists') there is no regulation whatsoever. This may indicate excessive faith in the skills passed on via the master-apprentice process, or the perception that dance is mostly a hobby, not particularly arduous or dangerous. The Safe Dance Reports and dance professionals tell us otherwise.

Many dancers make a living by cobbling together income from grants, performances, teaching gigs and community dance projects. They often work independently or in small groups that rarely intersect and they 'fall' into teaching or facilitation using their own experiences as a reference. We see this particularly in the self-taught and usually very gifted dancers of street dance forms. The master/apprentice approach is particularly dangerous here, where movement made and performed safely on one (highly trained, conditioned and flexible) body can be highly risky for another, particularly a beginner.

So while Ausdance is no regulator of dance training or practice, as a peak body we identified dance teacher training needs for the communities and dancers that exist outside the societies, institutions and mainstream schooling. The training needed to be of high quality, inexpensive, capable of being undertaken over a few weeks and flexible enough to accommodate a range of styles and levels of experience. Within this time, the participants would need to learn about teaching, safe dance practice and their legal and ethical responsibilities. The Australian Guidelines for Dance Teachers and the Code of Ethics created a clear and structured way forward, as did the three units in the Social and Recreational Training Package. And so, Ausdance invested in developing these units into a

'skill set' to be delivered through its registered training branch in Victoria. In its first year, 17 people around Australia completed the training and in its second year, this number rose to 37. Participant styles ranged from Ukrainian dance, tap, jazz, contemporary, creative dance, ballroom, classical ballet, highland dancing and dance for students with Down syndrome.

Now other changes are affecting the dance landscape: the National Dance Qualifications (VET) (4) and the introduction of the Arts into the Australian Curriculum. The curriculum will recommend that students experience all of the five nominated art forms, of which dance is one. However, there are not enough dance teachers with Bachelors of Education or Dip.Eds to go around. Schools that want specialist dance teachers will have to recruit from the industry and they will look for people they can trust to design and assess programs, lead and safely teach their students. Without many industry links or knowledge of best practice and reputation, schools will look for people with experience and training. The Ausdance skill set for Teaching Dance will support both the dancers looking for work and the students in their care.

There will always be challenges and tremors in the landscape. We can only predict, prepare and act – without the stick.

visit www.ausdance.org.au/dance_education.html / For Ausdance Victoria **visit** www.victoriandancedirectory.com.au/ausdance-vic / For National Dance Qualifications **visit** http://skillshub.com.au/projects/past_projects3/national_dance_qualifications/

References

- (1) http://www.ausdance.org.au/professional_practice/dance-industry-code-of-ethics.html
- (2) Australian Guidelines for Dance Teachers, edited and designed by Ausdance National, published by CREATE Australia and Ausdance National, 1997
- (3) The Safe Dance Report, Create and Ausdance National, ACT 1990 pp Appendices
- (4) Vocational Education and Training. 'Vocational' means work-related.