

The rise and rise of community dance

Michelle Silby, independent arts consultant based in Sydney and working in the UK and Australia, sets out some of the current developments in community dance in Australia



Above and page 13: 100 members of the public in Moving One Hundred. Choreography: Stephanie Lake. Produced by Ausdance Victoria and Chunky Move, in association with contemporarydance.com.au and Federation Square. Photo: Belinda Strodder 2009

In Australia the arts have to compete with many other activities. Australia is an 'outdoors' nation: many people embrace sports, leisure, arts and other recreational activities. Dance can often be an indoors and a seemingly mysterious occupation, only for those in the know.

Increasingly, however, dance is becoming less mysterious. Australia is witnessing an increased participation in a broad range of activity from community dance practice orchestrated by professional practitioners through to flash mobs and all the blurred line of activity in-between.

In writing this article I am looking through a dual lens of the UK and Australia. I have had the privilege of living in Australia for the last five years, working in various capacities as a director, artist and until recently Program Manager for Dance at The Australia Council for the Arts. In the UK following a performance career during which I always sought to work with companies that had a high level of community involvement, I led *teesdanceinitiative* (now Tees Valley Dance) and later became an Arts Education Consultant to the city of York. What was amazing for me during this 15 year period was witnessing the breadth of dance activity and the capacities dance was used and appreciated in. I was very fortunate early on in my career to encounter fantastic professional artists who introduced me to working with the wider aspects of the community. I was given supported opportunities to learn how to work with non-professional dancers from all ages and walks of life. This was a true gift to me.

It has been a fascinating journey for me, exploring Australia's dance scene and evolving culture. Australia has a wealth of dance talent and a growing awareness and interest from the general population in dance. Dance is playing an important role in showcasing the geographic and cultural diversity that >

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shapes Australia. The country can draw from the rich cultures of Indigenous Australians where dance is often an integral part of life. (Bangarra Dance Theatre is the best known example, other prominent independent artists include Vicki Van Hout and Gary Lang). In parallel Australians who have migrated from many nations are all bringing their unique culture, traditional 'community' and ceremonial dances.

In terms of 'professional' community dance practice, there are many hidden gems of organisations, companies and individuals undertaking excellent work outside mainstream dance studios and traditional performance contexts. Growth areas include people with mixed abilities (Restless Dance Theatre, Deaf Can Dance, Arts Access network, Rawcus Theatre); the youth sector (QL2 centre for youth dance in Canberra, Steps in Western Australia, Stompin in Tasmania, Fresh Bred in South Australia to name a few); inter-generational projects (Tasmanian Community Dance project, run by Tasmanian Regional Arts, funded by The Australia Council for the Arts) as well as, of course, the general adult public just wanting to dance! Community dance is gaining increased recognition both from within the dance profession, general public, government and public services.

In the last few years participation rates in dance have surged. There has been a substantial rise in attendance at organised dance and exercise classes and dance workshops. The general public's natural 'have a go' attitude is also being applied towards dance in wider, less formal contexts. The use of dance in public outdoor events, reflecting the outdoors lifestyle in Australia, has further aided the visibility of dance to the community. Many opportunities are provided to participate in events across Australia organised by local councils, venues, festivals and dance/arts organisations.

Australia has a long standing record of producing outstanding arts festivals, many of which involve free or low cost music concerts and dance participation events, pop-up theatre, that provoke a spontaneous dance response, the en-masse individuals becoming a collective community.

As an example, the Sydney Festival, particularly Festival First Night, sees many open-air events and thousands of people who don't normally participate in dance just pick up the vibe and join in. In 2009 the public was invited to help transform Sydney's city centre into one mass dance floor.

Thousands of people in the audience learnt a specially created dance piece – doing 'the Sydney' choreographed by Garry Stewart, Director of Australian Dance Theatre. This was available in advance to learn online wherever you lived (1).

I attended Festival First Night and witnessed thousands of people dancing across the city. The atmosphere was electric, a sea of dancing bodies. I came away feeling energised and connected to the people and place where I live. The 2010 and 2011 festivals saw many participatory open-air events working with large and smaller scale companies such as You Move (dance company for youth/emerging artists) in partnership with Western Sydney Dance Action.

The Ten Days on the Island biennial festival in Tasmania has offered a plethora of participatory events over the years to include street parties, dance hall style gatherings (2) and the dance marathon. Another highlight in Tasmania in 2010 was the We Tube Live project, which brought hundreds of young people together in a virtual/live interactive performance with the public, created by Stompin youth dance company (3).

Melbourne Fringe Festival has a reputation for putting arts out in the public domain, thereby making arts easily accessible. This year's large scale public project to look out for is Common People Dance Project (4). This link also contains an interview with the key artists on the project, who talk about the process but also why it is important to connect through dance.

Ausdance National and Ausdance state and territory offices provide a conduit for engagement with dance. One example is the biennial Australia Youth Dance Festival, which sees hundreds of young people, their families and the local community get involved. The 2009 festival held in Mandurah, organised by Ausdance WA (Western Australia), under the Artistic Direction of Claudia Alessi, provided multiple participation opportunities and resulted in a public outdoor performance on the foreshore in Mandurah. Tracks Dance Company in Darwin create extraordinary outdoor performances where the 'community' is their company. Chunky Move and Ausdance Victoria worked in partnership to create 'Moving One Hundred' as seen in the photos. There are a growing number of examples like this. The QL2 centre for youth dance is currently planning a large-scale dance event for the 2013 centenary celebrations of Canberra.

Right: 100 members of the public in Moving One Hundred. See page 11 for full credit details



These sort of events create huge opportunities to participate but also sow the seed of enthusiasm for participation, ‘doing it’ – give it a go, dance in your garage, post your dance on YouTube, create your own dance experience.

Flash mobs have become a new currency of communication. Many arts and non-arts organisations are using flash mobs to communicate their political opinion, celebrate and promote events. The distinction between flash mobs and more formally organised events is of course blurry, but the increased use of dance in public gatherings has been notable. A few small examples: A flash mob used by Ascham Girls School Sydney, to celebrate their 125th anniversary, Tourism Ireland on St. Patrick’s Day 2010 at Central Station Sydney, in which over 120 dancers took part, including 20 dancers from the world renowned Riverdance Show and dancers from the local community (5).

A beautiful example of a flash mob being used to bring people together to celebrate people with different abilities was led by Rawcus, held in Federation Square, Melbourne in 2010 (6).

One question is why do people want to participate in ‘community dance’ activities?

Without attempting to dive deeply into areas of sociology, I offer the following as a few thoughts and observations on this question. Many aspects fuel the way in which we choose to participate in life. The way people work, live, travel and communicate all effect and inform the way ‘community’ is formed. This informs people’s choices of engagement with dance and other activities.

Thirty years ago small pockets of what we may recognise as community dance practice existed – although in indigenous communities the importance and tradition of community dance never abated. For a lot of other communities dance had been used as a way for the community to come together, for celebrations, ceremonies and cultural dance performed in specific contexts. Today these sorts of dance experiences might be more described as cultural and traditional dance practice and have become practised less by younger generations.

Over the last 30 years the rise in large scale music festivals drew crowds who are able to spontaneously dance in ‘their’ community. The 90s saw the en masse dance and rave parties, people wanting to dance as part of a community.

More recently the convergence of several phenomena, such as the decline of collective mono-cultural practices, the greater awareness of exciting forms of dance through the media and through travel, the rise of highly segmented individual pursuits often enabled by technology and social media, all lead individuals to seek and be able to form part of a ‘community’ relevant to them. This community might exist for a few moments in time through a flash mob or be part of a much longer ongoing engagement.

Awareness of dance has been raised through bringing dance directly into living rooms through television shows such as So You Think You Can Dance, and Dancing with the Stars. This has given immediate access to those who otherwise would not seek out dance. Mass media attention, coupled with natural enthusiasts and die-hard dance supporters makes for a lot of interesting conversations in the coffee shop being generated between strangers and friends alike, it is no longer just about the footy!

Dance has always been an integral part of building communities. Perhaps flash mobs are the new ‘village fete dance’ – a new, re-packaged form of communication and cultural expression. Perhaps it just makes you feel good to dance as part of a community in an age where we spend an increasing amount of time in individual pursuits and communication through email, text, blog, Facebook, etc. Ironically this same modern technology can both isolate and thankfully connect us. Most flash mobs are organised by mobile phone and social media platforms. Dancing in a community dance activity orchestrated by professionals in a flash mob or dance party at a festival makes us feel part of a community again. Even if we just dance next to each other, it’s a start to reclaiming an integral part of our human expression – our need to connect.

contact michelle.silby@bigpond.com

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