

We are not Struggling, we are thriving!



By Karen Barbour

Dance in the Waikato region is thriving, particularly in Whaingaroa (Raglan), Soul Speed, as they introduce themselves are "a dance and theatre troupe from Whaingaroa, Waikato. We are mothers, fathers, children, friends and family brought together" initially to raise awareness through performance about the critically endangered Maui Dolphin, the Popoto.



Children dancing, Patti Mitcheley's classes
Photo: Kim Marsh

The kaupapa of Soul Speed is to reconnect people to their environments and to slow down to the 'speed of the soul'. Moving away from the high-speed lifestyle of contemporary society, these dancers, actors, musicians and tamariki are taking action, trying to make a difference in environmental awareness. And they are succeeding in sharing their message, says director Ardre Foote (Taranaki Te Pakakohi, Kahungunu, Ngati Porou).

Ardre's first Soul Speed work was Popoto Whakamiharo and it has been performed at the Eco Sound Splash Festival and the Raglan Town Hall, at WOMAD in Taranaki, at the Jambalaya Festival in Rotorua, at The University of Waikato in Hamilton and finally at Te Papa in Wellington. At each event, Soul Speed urged their audience to participate, both by engaging in their performance and by completing a postcard detailing their concern about the Popoto's decline. All these postcard messages were collected and presented to the Minister of Conservation and other government officials in Wellington in their Te Papa performance. Soul Speed's grass roots community activism was supported by the World Wildlife Federation, and helped by donations from individuals, the Raglan Community Arts Council and by Kiwi Experience's provision of a bus for the group's travel.

As an audience member at two of the group's performances, I was deeply moved by the passion of the performance, and still treasure my part of their set. During the performance I was given an end of the symbolic net to hold, literally linking me to the performance. When this link between audience and performers was cut in the dramatic development of the dance, I was urged to remember that 'it was in my hands' to take up environmental concerns. Making an emotional connection with their audience and engendering a sense of personal

responsibility for environmental issues is central to Soul Speed's performances.

"I was given an end of the symbolic net to hold, literally linking me to the performance"

The decline of the popoto dolphin is symptomatic of a lack of environmental responsibility and consideration by large companies such as fishing and mining companies internationally. However, part of Soul Speed's aim is to show that individuals and small communities can have an impact, not just in taking messages to negligent companies or to government, but through

raising awareness and empowering the most affected local iwi and communities.

Motivated and responsive to these current local and global issues, this time surrounding the Whaling Moratorium, Soul Speed's next project is a work about the Tohora (the Southern Right whale). Ardre was recently given a wonderfully long track of an individual whale sounding, recorded in Tonga by marine biologist Liz Slooten.

"The whale's continuous korero is unusual, and has an urgency over the 15-20 minutes recorded. It is insistent! It sounds to me like a koro on the paepae urging people to listen to whales' concerns!" says Ardre. This recording, mixed with Ardre's vocals and other instruments, is the basis from which the new work will grow, with live cello, taonga puoro and dance theatre.

Ardre herself has a strong performance background, growing up with ballet and contemporary dance in Gisborne, studying in Sweden at the Stage School as a young woman, and performing in Sydney with Polynesian group Pacific Sway, Theatre in the Park and African dance groups before returning home to Aotearoa with partner Antonio. Knowing the rich talent of people in Whaingaroa I look forward to this new work from Soul Speed.

Ardre and local dancer Patti Mitchley commented to me that many dance people seem to have low expectations of community dance performances. Both feel that this is to overlook the wealth of talent that filters down to small communities as artists leave the main centres in search of a more sustainable life style. This attitude also ignores the diverse talents of local community performers that can be nurtured by artists working at a community level. For many of the Whaingaroa artists, performing with Soul Speed was both personally important for their own expression as well as a political imperative, and necessitated volunteering their time and energy. Ardre is pleased that they now have funding through Te Puni Kokiri for their new Tohora work, which will be performed first at the Enviro Schools Hui at the end of September. Funding provides a putea for performers, teachers and covers administration of the project.

The wider community in Whaingaroa also has the chance to participate in dance classes. Patti has been teaching creative movement classes in Raglan for children and adults since 2003. These initially informal classes have continued to gather momentum and now culminate each year in a children's performance for the community exploring environmental themes. Last year's work *Slowing the Sun* was a great success, drawing local artists, designers, stage crew and musicians into developing the project and filling the Town Hall with an enthusiastic audience. Patti's approach to community dance complements the work of Ardre and Soul Speed, adding another layer to the vibrant Whaingaroa community. So, while balancing time with their children, Ardre, Patti and the 20+ members of Soul Speed inspire emotion and promote responsibility through community dance, environmental awareness and performance. Kia kaha Soul Speed.

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