

Wendy Wallace MOVING ON GRACEFULLY

By Sue Cheesman

Wendy Wallace has been the associate director and head of contemporary dance at the New Zealand School of Dance, in Wellington for over eight years. She is now moving to Auckland to become rehearsal director for Black Grace. Sue Cheesman talks to her about her time with the school and her new role with the company.

Tell me about your recent dance experience and highlight pivotal moments?

Ten years ago I thought I had got to the age where it was time to Leave the studio and go into arts funding. So I went back to university at Queensland UT and gained a BA in Dance. I'd had a wonderful career as a dancer, choreographer, artistic director and rehearsal director. At the end of the course I jokingly said to my supervisor "I have my dance degree, where is my job?" She replied that there was one going in New Zealand. I applied for the job at the New Zealand School of Dance and stayed for eight and half years. I was really pleased to get the job because, at that time I realised I was not ready to leave dance as a practice. My introduction to New Zealand was in 1981 touring with 'Human Veins', a show supported by the QE II Arts Council.

Right from the outset in professional dance companies always taught company class, so the idea of teaching has never been something you would do after having a career. It is something I really enjoy and have been curious about.

In New Zealand, I came into contact with Ann Dewey, Michael Parmenter and Helen Winchester who were teaching this wonderful contemporary dance, which was very different to the way I approached contemporary dance, having been trained in Ballet, Cunningham and Graham. If I look at the classes I taught when I first came here and the classes I teach now, I would have to say that the greatest influence on my career has been my time in New Zealand. The reason I am still here is that I find the contemporary dance culture in this country inspiring and challenging.

What is different about contemporary dance culture here, is it the aesthetic or technique – an energy perhaps?

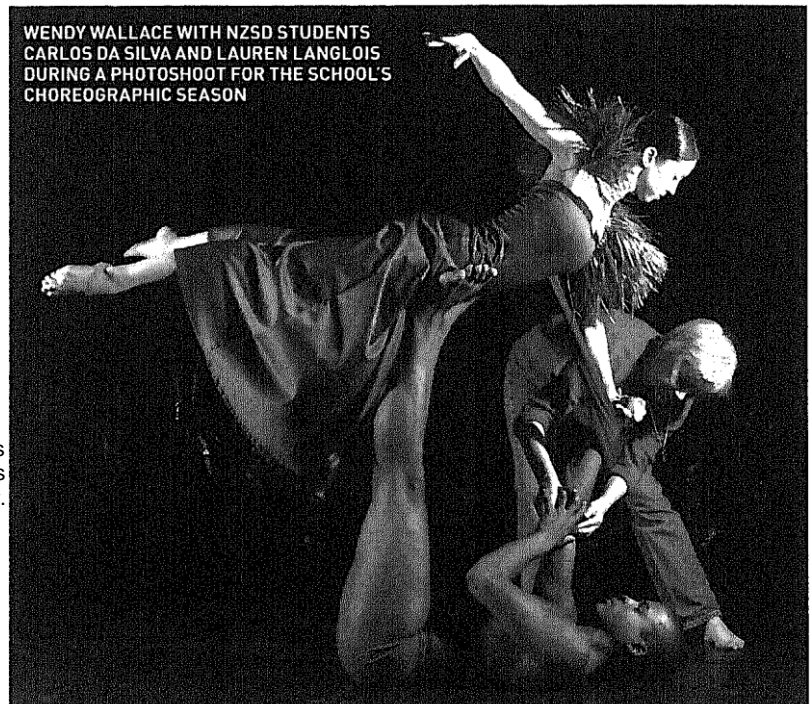
All of those - firstly it is more athletic - someone said to me that New Zealand dance was sacrificial, there is such a courage and a willingness to go beyond what you think a set technique is. It seems to break barriers. I found it very individual and not particularly informed by Nederlands Dans Theater or Martha Graham. It has originality which I found was not afraid to make statements that are not necessarily easy to take, as exemplified in Douglas Wright's 'Black Milk'. I have always thought contemporary art forms should, to a certain extent, be accessible so people can find their way but also support the idea that contemporary art challenges, questioning the things we take for granted, provoking discussion, thought and perhaps action.

What do you think you achieved in your job at in the New Zealand School of Dance?

When I arrived, there was an assortment of interesting classes, not really a structured course. I developed the course over the years and feel that the contemporary dance training now has a high profile both nationally and internationally. There is an increase in the number of students auditioning for the contemporary programme and the graduate employment rate has increased. One thing I am particularly proud of is the student choreographic season that has evolved and been able to commission New Zealand composers and designers. With this season developing quite a reputation on the Wellington arts calendar, I feel good in that whoever takes over from me will have something solid to build from.

What excites you about working with Black Grace?

My first project is remounting some of the core programme as well as bringing some of the new work from 'Amata'. I feel it is a very interesting project to be part of and it fulfills my need to get back to the professional sector. I enjoy the intellectual discussion Neil and I have about the work and the energy of his company. I feel very privileged to be part of this next phase.



WENDY WALLACE WITH NZSD STUDENTS CARLOS DA SILVA AND LAUREN LANGLOIS DURING A PHOTOSHOOT FOR THE SCHOOL'S CHOREOGRAPHIC SEASON

Describe the new job at Black Grace

I function as a rehearsal director, company teacher and company director in Neil's absence. Next year there is a large tour of the USA. It is a very trusting relationship. We talk about how we plan to train the dancers, what the repertoire requires of them and who we will need to bring in. Basically, it is working alongside Neil so he is not spread so thinly. It is his vision but I feel aligned with that. I will remount from video work - that is do the bones - and Neil will put the flesh on the work. It is important to acknowledge that the work was made on and for particular people, and although the integrity of the work won't change, certain things will.

What I teach will be guided by what the work requires and hopefully I can enlarge the dancers' repertoires so that there are more creative tools that Neil can work with. I am curious about how Neil achieves such precision. I am very interested to be allowed inside the process, that is, to be there from the beginning of the creative process and be totally involved.

I am excited about Living in Auckland and seeing what the vibrant Auckland dance community is doing.