



## **Student Information**

### **Interview with Natalie Weir, Artistic Director, Expressions Dance Company (2009)**

**By Denise Richardson**

#### **What is your artistic vision for Expressions?**

Getting the company back onto triennial funding would be a huge boost for us. I would really like to keep the ensemble format of Expressions, so that the company doesn't become project based, and to have the dancers working full-time. Ultimately, long term I would like ten dancers, in order to have people as covers in times of injury and to have a depth of young people as well as mature dancers to work with. We have formed partnerships with Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) and also with the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts (JWC). These partnerships are very important to us in terms of being able to create work for specific venues; larger works for QPAC and other larger mainstream venues, and more edgy, risky and experimental works for the JWC and for the smaller touring circuit. I want to create a signature work each year, which will help establish the creative identity of Expressions. The work that I make tells real stories. It is emotional, quite poetic, but speaks of today. Beauty is always an element in my works also. It is important therefore that these works establish who we are. And this signature will be very different from the very strong dance theatre signature that Maggi Sietsma gave to the company. Although my work is very dramatic the drama is contained within the movement. We would really like to collaborate with other companies, especially internationally, and I have a very strong commitment to emerging choreographers, to provide a platform and hopefully eventually a place where they can do a work as a stepping-stone to the further development of the work for a second larger season. We'd also like to be a company that can tour a lot more, but that will take time. We have to establish good accessible work first that gives us a clear identity. And finally I would like to be able to invite established choreographers to mount work on the company, once we are more financially secure.

#### **How do you create your works?**

Collaboration is the most important factor in the way I create. And the reason I have been pursuing the idea of having a company over the past few years is because of that idea of having an ensemble of dancers that you know and trust. I am really interested to see where my work goes once I have an established ensemble with that on-going relationship. I feel that I will do my best work once I have that model, which is the perfect model for me because of the way I collaborate. I feel I draw the movement out of the dancer in front of me so the work for a contemporary dancer will look very different from that of a classical dancer. And the conversation between me, as the choreographer and the dancers is the most important thing. I don't demonstrate, I explain images and feelings and I suggest. It is rather like being a sculptor and revealing what's already in the stone. In some ways I feel like a director. The dancer has to feel ownership of the movement and the emotion; everything belongs to them. That's also how I work with other companies but when you're going into a company without knowing anyone, a lot of time is often spent tuning in to the way the dancers move.



**Where do you get your ideas from when putting together a new work?**

They come from lots of places. Sometimes poems or paintings, things I hear, things I read in the paper, or see on the television. Novels, Shakespeare - words really inspire me. Anything. Life. I also think that having children has exposed me to a huge range of maternal feelings. The maternal and protective instinct; the love you have for your children. Making dance that is understandable is also now more important to me. I used to make more abstract work, but lately I've been doing more stories, and now at Expressions I'm trying to do work that, while not strictly narrative, is more easily followed. I think that contemporary dance can often be alienating and I really don't want that to be the case. I want to feel that the audience can get inside the work. Not to necessarily understand it all, but to have a way in to the work. And I think connecting to the audience's emotions is the way to do that.

**Describe the stylistic features of your choreography?**

My signature at the moment is in partnering work, the way that I intertwine bodies. And this is my greatest passion, duet work, especially between the male and the female. I think my work is very organic; hopefully the dancers also look like human beings when they perform my work. My works are always about people, or a thought or an emotion. They are usually very emotional and I think that is a strength of mine. I think I have an ability to move people, and I know that's what I want to experience when I go to a performance. To be moved or touched in some way. So that is what I am pursuing at the moment.

**How important is the music in the creation of a work?**

Music is hugely important and we would really like to collaborate with live musicians here. All through my career I have worked with existing music like film or orchestral music written for another purpose. And while that's good in that the pictures that the music conjures can inspire you, I think that to have something created specifically for the work that you're doing, collaborating with a composer, as well as the live music element, is absolutely vital. I'd like to see this company head back in that path again, but of course finance is the big issue there.

**Do you like to have the music before you start choreographing or not?**

Yes, in the past I have. Sometimes I try different music to see how it holds dance, if it supports it without overpowering the movement. Other times I might use a piece of music, like the Stravinsky for my works *Orpheus* and *Petroushka*, and that then very clearly becomes my starting point. It changes with every work. But music is a huge inspiration for me. With a commissioned score the music would be written as the dance is written, and that will be a tricky thing to navigate. Long term the goal is to have works composed, or to have live musicians play specially arranged music.

**Do you use text or is the drama created within the movement itself?**

No, at this point I'm not really tempted to go in the direction of using text. The drama comes from the movement, and the dancers and the way the work is constructed. I think my works are really theatrical but they're not dance theatre. It's not physical theatre either. I guess my works have a classical starting point, but with a company like this the classical idiom is used a lot less.



**How will your works differ for Expressions from those you choreograph for ballet companies like Queensland Ballet?**

For QB I did quite iconic pieces, like *Wuthering Heights* and *Petroushka*. Here I do works that come more from me, from the dancers, from reality. So I think that is the difference. And the movement style is very different as well. The length of time that I have to create seems to be much longer here as well, and more intense, just in terms of my being here all the time. The way the dancers respond to me is also different because of the different vocabulary that they are using – the contemporary dance genre. It is really going back to my roots. It feels very comfortable. And I am keen to see what happens with my work once the dancers have absorbed my style into their bodies; where that takes me as a choreographer and therefore where it takes the company in terms of its identity.

**What choreographic methods do the dancers of Expressions use?**

My way of creating is a sort of conversation. I bring in images, I bring in ideas and for *The House Project* I asked the dancers to write specific memories of when they were children. This all informs the work. But then the movement comes out of our direct relationship. I don't send the dancers away to create movement; it all comes from the conversations between them and me. I'll say: "That was nice, maybe if you try it a little more this way." And they'll try something else, and often take me in directions that I hadn't even thought of. None of the movement is pre-planned; it's always spontaneous. But the ideas and the images are always very clear in my mind when I walk into the studio and so that is our starting point. It's a very individual thing.

**Do you believe in collaborations in the making of a new work?**

The design element for me is very important. Having the discussion with the designer really early in the process, even before rehearsals begin is the way I like to work. For instance with other companies the set will be placed in the studio the day you start rehearsals. So that interaction with the set and making it an organic part of the visual aspect is really important. I respond really well to designers. They give me pictures and photos and they throw their own ideas at me and that is always a very intense collaboration and that's the way I like to work. I like to be advanced enough in my thinking to have the set up and functioning before we start rehearsals, so the work evolves through the set.

**Are there any negative aspects to working this way?**

It's really about working with the right like-minded people. I like the working atmosphere to be calm and positive, so I usually pick people to work with who like to work in that way. I don't think that great art can exist where there's fear. It is just a matter of finding those like-minded people. When collaborations go wrong, it is often because the personalities or the aesthetics aren't right. Not that I don't think collaborations can't be challenging – I have no problem with that – as long as you have someone who has a similar vision.



**Who have been your greatest influences throughout your career?**

Early in my life it would be my ballet teacher Ann Roberts. She taught me that dance wasn't about technique but about telling people who you were and about emotion and expressing what was in your soul. And that has stayed with me. I think Maggi Sietsma has been a very strong influence, ever since I was very young. As far as other choreographers, I have been quite eclectic with these influences. Because I wasn't a dancer in a company I have never been terribly influenced by any one person. I love the work of Jiri Kylian, and William Forsythe, but I can't think of any one choreographer in particular. And of course my parents have been a major influence on my life and my husband Peter Marshall of twenty odd years. That support has been vital to my success.

**How did you begin your dance career?**

Mum sent me to ballet as a young girl and it fast became a passion. By the time I was fourteen or fifteen I was dancing seven days a week.

**When and why did you make the transition to choreographer?**

I came to Queensland Institute of Technology (now QUT) and it was during that time that a career in choreography occurred to me. By the time I finished the course I didn't want to be dancer anymore, I wanted to choreograph. Maggi took me into Expressions and I did schools tours with the company, until I decided to hang up my boots and pursue choreography.

**What qualities are you looking for in dancers?**

There's not a specific mould. What attracts me to a dancer is the way they move. There is certainly an organic quality that I look for. The dancer needs to be very malleable and also open to the idea of collaboration and giving equally to the creative relationship. Not relying on being told what to do all the time. The creative process is very organic and when it works it can be quite magical. I want to be touched by people who are generous in spirit, who dance with passion and who want to work with me as well, and who like to collaborate in that way. There is no specific look, they must be just very good dancers. I would say that ballet technique is important but it's not actually vital. We do a couple of ballet classes a week, Pilates and contemporary dance classes. But the dancers have to be gutsy and strong and brave. Theatrically I like them to be understated.