

Taking Chances, Making Choices

ROSS MCCORMACK

By Raewyn Whyte



Over the past eight years, New Zealand dancer Ross McCormack has earned international respect for his performances in the leading edge Belgium-based contemporary dance company Les Ballets C de la B. Since 2005, he has toured all over the world with them, dancing in three of their major works: *VSPRS*, *Patchagonia*, and *Out of Context – for Pina*.

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When McCormack first saw the company perform *lets Op Bach* at the New Zealand International Festival in Wellington in 2000, he knew that was the company he wanted to be part of. Soon to graduate from the NZ School of Dance, he found the work utterly compelling, and he stayed in his seat till everyone else had left the theatre, then went backstage to meet the dancers.

lets op Bach was my wakeup call, the first time a work of art had gone right inside me to the point that I wanted to defend it and the issues it raised. *lets Op Bach* reminded me of my own hometown, Rangiora and the bars there - The Plough Hotel, The Junction - and the dirty, grunty life which happened around them and the things that happened that you were not supposed to look at. Here on stage was a world that demanded your scrutiny, demanded that you to respond to the issues it was facing you with. I knew I wanted to be part of a company which made works that did that."

McCormack danced a Douglas Wright solo for his graduation performance in 2001, then toured in the international season of Wright's *Inland*, briefly worked with Raewyn Hill, and with the Royal New Zealand Ballet, and then joined ADT (Australia Dance Theatre) in 2003. Over the next couple of years he worked with director Garry Stewart on the development of *Birdbrain*, *The Age of Unbeauty*, and *HELD*, Stewart's collaboration with American dance photographer Lois Greenfield. *HELD* brought McCormack a prestigious 2004 Helpmann Award for Best Male Dancer in a Ballet or Dance Work.

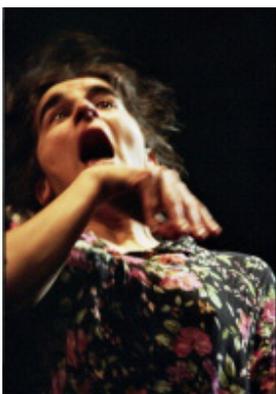
"I learned some great things at ADT, and doors were certainly open to me in Australia, but I felt that I didn't really fit in there, and always there was the lure of European dance theatre calling me onwards to a different kind of work altogether. So I headed for Belgium."

"Six years after seeing Les Ballets C de la B in Wellington, I was lucky enough to join the company, and discover how their amazing works are developed. They have become my second family."

"Having an international career as a dancer is not really something you plan to do," he says. "If you are very lucky, it happens that you find yourself working in a company that tours internationally and provides you with amazing opportunities as a performer."

"It's easy enough to build a career which spans New Zealand and Australia. The system of work and travel visas lets you work in either country when the work is available, the festivals circuit is spread across both countries throughout the year, and there are always new projects in development. But it's very different in Europe."

"In Europe, September to January is when new work is developed especially by the bigger companies, followed by premieres in January and February, with further development and rehearsals through to May or



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June, and then touring and performances through till September.”

“If you are an independent dancer, or working with a stream of small companies, then the pattern is different again. The small companies don’t have the resources to get you a visa, and if you don’t have a visa, you generally can’t even audition.”

“I am very lucky that I work for Les Ballets C de la B, not just because they look after me and my visa and other paperwork that enables me to go on working with them, but also because they schedule ahead for five years, and I can timetable my activities well ahead also.”

“Right now, I am booked until 2015. I will be mostly in New Zealand until October, although I am touring in Ireland and the UK in Lucy Guerin’s *Untrained* for a few weeks in May and June, and there’s a couple of weeks in Seoul where I will be part of a dance season with five former male dancers from C de la B. In October I go back to Belgium to rejoin C de la B and we start development for their new work, *tauber bach*, which we will be touring most of next year. I do have some breaks, and I will be here in New Zealand when I can.”

“New Zealand is definitely where I want to be, where I want to be making my own dances, where I’ll buy a house. It’s just a matter of time. I’d love to perform here as well, as opportunities arise. I’ve really enjoyed developing *Amanimal* with Rifleman Productions and there are plans for that to be performed again. It’s just a matter of timetabling.”

Since 2008, McCormack has been slowly shifting the balance of his dance career towards choreography, and now has a steady stream of successful commissions behind him in Australia and New Zealand.

He has made a series of short works for students at the New Zealand School of Dance (*Symbiotic* 2008, *SUM* 2011), for Footnote Dance Company, (*Stealth* 2009, *SEX: Flesh, Skin, Urge, Trance, Ecstasy, Beauty, Cruelty* 2012), for WAPPA’s graduate LINK dance company (*I Said Ha Ha* 2011) and for graduating students at UNITEC (*Rahui* 2012). Dance North commissioned the very successful full-length work

Nowhere Fast (2009) and followed that with a short work *S/C* (2010). He contributed the *Papa Nuku* section to Okareka Dance Company’s *Nga Hau e Wha* (2011), and worked as Sara Brodie’s choreographic assistant on the Melbourne International Festival commission *Fault Lines* (2012). Most recently he has been artist in resident on Footnote’s ChoreoLAB 2013, and he has a major collaborative work under development with producer Melanie Hamilton and lighting designer Natasha James, AGE, which he hopes will premiere in 2014.

His dances are intense, fast moving ensemble works, concerned with the visceral, strength, and extraordinary articulation of the human body. Often the movement is collaged from disparate fragments, and it always makes the most of the individual strengths and versatility of the dancers.

“I have learned a vast amount from working with C de la B director Alain Platel,” he says. “Everyone he works with, I think, learns from him a particular focus on the body, a particular interest in investigating movement and ways of bringing particular energies to that investigation. I have my own particular interest in the beauty of movement and the ambiguities that can co-exist in the relationships between bodies. But more than that, I have learned the value of creating an environment of creative freedom in which everyone is equally accepted and respected, and everyone’s contributions are valued.”

“This is an environment where challenges can be taken on and brick walls faced. I try to create that kind of environment no matter who I am working with, and I encourage them to throw themselves fully into the process of creativity, both externally in terms of the articulation of the body, but also internally, investigating the deeper aspects of what is being discovered.”

“I start with a simple physical task and get everyone immersed, including me, find out where everyone is at and watch the body talk. After that we can move on together, improvise, write stories, explore tasks, ask questions, open things up, build on what we discover, slowly shape the work.” ■

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