

Black Grace Taking it to the World

By Francesca Horsley



BLACK GRACE FROM LEFT CARL TOLENTINO
AND THOMAS FONUA
PHOTO: DUNCAN COLE

Black Grace is 17 years old. Newly housed in premises off Dominion Road in Mt Eden, the Auckland company is in good shape.

Artistic director Neil Ieremia says "It's great – you don't really stop to look up a lot but when you do and look back, its 17 years - a really long time for a New Zealand dance company to be around. I feel really proud – even if it's nothing compared to international companies that have been around for 50 years".

Black Grace has just returned from a twelve city tour of Germany where they received a passionate response and critical acclaim. Neil says that despite the company being really nervous about presenting a new programme, the audience loved it, giving sustained ovations in some of Germany's loveliest theatre venues.

The company has been touring internationally since 1996, primarily to North America, and more recently to Europe, beginning in 2003. "The tours seem to be getting better every year; we are at the point where we are more and more a seasoned touring company. We know what to expect, know how to get into venues quickly, put on a show, leave and travel to the next town."

Back at home Black Grace has taken pains to establish an audience that embraces a broad section of the public. Neil says people from all walks of life know about the company. He cites an example when three Māori men from a removal company, helping his parents move into their Hamilton home, talked about Black Grace. Or when in a bar in Wellington "a guy you wouldn't even think goes to dance said, 'well done with your dance man' – 'oh cheers' " Neil replied.

Black Grace has always had a distinctive audience. "The dancers talk about it all the time. We have really worked to broaden our dance audience in terms of not going back to the same people all the time." Outside the major cities, Black Grace have toured small centres - Waimate, Invercargill, Thames, Kaikohe. "Last year we got out on the road again and went to Ashburton. A couple of busloads came from Christchurch to see the show – there were a lot of locals too – it was good."

"We have really worked on this even though there is an enormous amount of risk involved. The international programme ensures there are sufficient funds to support domestic touring. This enables us to tour here – to pour some money back into our local market, even though it is very difficult."

To tour internationally, the only outlay for the company was to pay for airfares to Germany – the rest was covered by the promoter. Neil says the promoter manages the tour from go to whoa. "We rely on local knowledge and have established a relationship with a promoter in Germany since 2009. His company presents not only dance but opera and he has an established touring circuit which we are part of. Every couple of years we are going back and returning to a similar circuit. Hopefully we will add new places and eventually bigger cities."

Neil is enthusiastic about the response and the feedback, performing in theatres where some of his heroes perform - Jiri Kylian, Cloud Gate Theatre, and Bangarra Dance Company, which had just finished touring the circuit Black Grace had completed.

Black Grace is returning to North America in 2013 for a six weeks tour. "We are going to Seattle, Washington, Pittsburgh, Vancouver and other cities. To sustain Black Grace on the road for a week takes tens of thousands of dollars – salaries, accommodation. We have developed the touring market in North America and it is going really well – we can go back to places and people are glad to have us back – it's fun."

The company went on a one week tour to Korea at the end of May, but Neil says the primary focus is developing markets in North America and Germany.

It is important to develop the markets slowly. "It's very deliberate. When you are talking about that much money and risk you can't go in there half-cocked. You need to know the market and who you are dealing with. Before we went to North America regularly, I spent some time over there; spent time with the Paul Taylor Company and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater looking at the management side, because I wanted to see how these 50 year old companies evolved. I looked at how they diversified their work, learnt about funding – something not available back here."

Developing the North American market has been a long process. A key element was to find a really good agent, and Black Grace has been extremely lucky to have New Yorker, Rena Shagan, as its dance agent. Rena also represents Pina Bausch in America, along with William Forsyth, Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, the Martha Graham Company - and Black Grace. "She has an enormous amount of respect over there in the industry, they trust her opinion and if she says it is going to work, the theatres trust her."

"She is a real straight shooter, and I like her. She flew over to Germany on this tour for a night to see the show – flew back the next morning. We wanted to update her with the latest images and the work - the last time we toured there was 2010. Every time she comes she gives me feedback. I trust her opinion; she has seen a lot of dance and worked with great choreographers, so I am really thrilled and humbled she will get on the plane to come and see my work."

Neil says he has always had a vision for the company to last long after he has gone. He wants a company where people are able to tell their stories and to perform at a high level. "There are some guiding principles and core values that have always shaped the culture of the company and that's important for its identity and the way the company develops and grows. It will be great to nurture this."

Applying all these things to an environment where the market is so small and where funding levels fluctuate is a challenge. "There is competition for the discretionary dollar – the bigger venues are bringing international musicals and people are starting to be a bit more careful where they spend their money."

Over the years the work has changed, "I would hate it if it didn't change; I am finding new ways to create vocabulary. I go back to movement which is not dissimilar to ballet; where there is a prescribed set of movement. I am developing that slowly". He also revisits movement vocabulary from previous works. "I now look at it differently and see it as becoming part of my personal vocabulary."

"I am a lot more relaxed about what I am making and this has a lot to do with the infrastructure around me. I am well supported. I don't feel I am on my own with the weight of the company resting on my shoulders." There is a core company of four full time dancers; Abby Crowther, Zoe Watkins, Sean MacDonald and Thomas Fonua. On the

tour to Germany they took two other women and three young graduates from the New Zealand School of Dance (who impressed with their all-round professionalism), to make a nine member company.

At present Neil is completing a new work, 'Waka', which evolved from a number of inspirations, including an exhibition by American Bill Viola he saw in Melbourne. The work, 'The Raft', left him with an enormous sense of humanity and hope. "We have all these barriers, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty we are all the same."

Another source of inspiration was the painting by Théodore Géricault, 'The Raft of the Medusa'. "I was interested in the idea of a raft. The painting of the arrival of Māori by Goldi depicts Māori navigators as if they accidentally arrived here at the mercy of ocean. The people are wrong, the canoes are wrong."

This brought him to remembering research he had done about Pasifika navigation – how they use their hands to find points on the horizon and find stars and how they understand wave formation.

Neil began gathering things and started looking at how people leave their homes before they embark on

a big journey – what they do – what they pack away, take, and how they remember those things in the new place. He began to look at the descendants of Polynesian people, and his own personal response to these questions.

"Who are these descendants, what are they going to do next? Where are we going? What is our raft going to be? I have children and I worry about them. What is this planet going to look like when they are older and decide to have children? What is this waka going to be in 100 years? Is Black Grace going to be a waka in 100 years time?" Neil asks. "Will it be a good waka?" For the present the company can be confident - 17 years of endeavour have steered it into sure waters. ■



BLACK GRACE
SEAN MACDONALD
PHOTO: DUNCAN COLE