Twenty-years ago, coming out of developments of the late 1980s, Aotearoa was in a wave of rising creative talent emanating from a new generation of Pacific Islands (PI) creatives - young, energetic and representative of a PI-Generation-X (a generation of Pacific Islanders grown in Aotearoa between the 60s and 80s).

A wave of consciousness was sweeping through our communities of the time and was reflected in the development of film and television, performance and visual art, education and sport – Pasifika Festival, Pacific Theatre, Pacific Underground, Tala Pacifica Productions, the exponential growth of Polyfest (The Auckland Secondary Schools Māori and Pacific Islands Cultural Festival) and the beginnings of MAU and Black Grace dance companies.

Pasifika was moving out of an inwardly looking heritage paradigm into a world conscious mainstream paradigm and was at last beginning to be recognised as an integral part of the New Zealand psyche and scene.

In terms of performance, Pacific cultures do not traditionally delineate between dance, music, song and so forth in a Western performance sense. These are all part of the same beau ideal or continuum of the expression of an artist or group to an audience (usually within a community setting) and often it is more of a personal sharing rather than the idea of a performance with no intended reciprocation or communal objective.

Pacific dance had been kept within families, churches and cultural groups, retaining their ethnic/cultural specific dance forms and linked to specific song and music forms or cultural events. What began to occur during the early 90s (though with precursors back to the 70s) was a cross-fertilisation of cultures at once looking back to their island homes and their remembered art-forms whilst also looking forward with the view that Aotearoa was their new home. The entire Pacific was connected here and was a multi-cultural home with new influences and expressions to explore.

Here, you began to see the new paradigm of Pasifika take shape – a coming together of the various communities; Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands, Niuean, Tokelauan, Tuvaluan, Tahitian and Fijian in the main. In this coming together under one banner also came the question of the navigation of relationships not only with Pakeha and Māori (and other cultural groups) but also within the internal relationships of each sub-community.

This was the beginning of hybridism, amalgamation and experimenting of formations of what was now termed Pasifika; not only representing single cultural specific, family or church orientated forms but taking aspects of all its parts and presenting a multi-cultural world view of who and what Pasifika was.

The term Pasifika itself was not a wholly agreed upon term at the time. Although the various communities agreed upon the greater vision the term represented, there were alternative spellings, which represented a slightly
differing view of what it should really mean. At this time you also saw alternatives such as Pacifica, Pasifika, PacifiKa and so on. The strongest of these terms was Pasifika, which is the Samoan spelling (pronunciation) for Pacific. This argument over terminology has never been fully agreed within these communities although the generic term Pasifika has been taken into the mainstream.

At this time two major developments occurred in the presentation and continuation of heritage dance within the larger milieu of the New Zealand Pacific experience – Auckland’s Polyfest and Pasifika. Today, Polyfest is one of the largest dance festivals for young people in Australasia, attracting 9,000 plus performers from more than 60 schools, and 100,000 spectators. It has grown not only to cater to the five major groups – Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands, Niuean and Māori - but now also has a Diversity and Contemporary dance stage in which the highest number of groups today now perform (55 in 2013). These come from a range of cultures including Chinese, Fijian, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Thai, and Tuvaluan, which also points to a wider Austro-Asian-Pacific link between these cultures.

Pasifika, on the other hand, is also the largest festival of its type in the world and today is a central iconic event on the Auckland scene. It has also spurred a number of other Pasifika festivals throughout the country. But apart from the growth of the presentation formats for heritage dance, Pacific people have also had an easy fit with hip hop/street dance and other contemporary forms. Māori and Pacific people were early adopters of hip hop culture and dance from the 70s right up to the 90s where a distinctly Pacific style of hip hop and street dance had emerged. Today, you can see this distinct style coming out of companies such as The Palace Dance Studio, hip hop dance crews such as Lil Saintz or in street dance battlefields such as Bring it On. While this has enjoyed popularity and success, ‘Polyswagg’ (as termed by Parris Goebel and her crew) although a world leader, is absorbed within the hip hop competition circuit and the wider framework of the genre.

However modern and contemporary dance has been able to pave a certain distinctly Pacific path and form within the theatre dance world. Starting with 1995 and Neil Ieremia’s Black Grace (from Porirua’s Cannons Creek to East Coast, USA’s Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival and beyond) we began to see the incorporation of Pacific Island movement within a contemporary setting. Here the formations are rearranged, the motifs are either subtle or dramatic; the movements have a Pacific base but are informed by stage dance technique and systems.

Sala Lemi Ponifasio’s MAU dance company on the other hand, although beginning in Aotearoa around the same time and within the same conscious shift, which was occurring in the wider community, had a base not in the New Zealand experience around ideas of identity and so forth but came from a global (butch dance) perspective. Although incorporating Pacific motifs and forms it is not of the same developmental path. Ponifasio’s work does not easily conform to the above conceptions of Pasifika but instead delves deep into the essence of the ethereal and ancient instinctive world of man and nature.

Although we have seen many Pacific dance companies and shows come and go over the past 20 years, the largest development of Pacific contemporary dance has been occurring in the last few years. Pacific theatre companies such as Nina Nawalowalo’s Conch Theatre, Kila Kokonut Krew and the works of ATC (Auckland Theatre Company) all incorporate some element of Pacific dance.

The number of emerging Pacific dance practitioners and choreographers forming works has grown immensely. Part of this development, in Auckland at least, has been due to the rise in numbers of participants going through dance programmes at PIPA (Pacific Institute of Performing Arts), MIT (Manukau Institute of Technology), Unitec Performing and Screen Arts, the University of Auckland’s Dance Studies and a whole range of other providers. This is also reflected in other national institutions such as Whāriki, the New Zealand School of Dance and Victoria University’s Va'aomanu Pasifika Studies department amongst others.

Black Grace’s UrbanYOUTHMovement (1999), the establishment of Pacific Dance New Zealand in 2010, the Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab and the Pacific Dance Artist in Residence have provided an avenue for many of these emerging artists to develop their craft. A range of new talent is developing their artistic ideas. These were seen in the phenomenal performance of Moana, a Pacific Dance Showcase in March this year and in the high standard of works by Pacific choreographers in Tempo Dance Festival 2013.

Over the past 20 years we have seen many changes in the landscape of dance in New Zealand. Pacific dance and practitioners of Pacific Island descent have contributed immensely to this landscape. The term Pacific dance is not an easy term to work with, as many Pakeha and others also feel a distinctly Pacific viewpoint and wish also to be incorporated into the term. Perhaps this is a question for Generation-Y to deal with and may well be an integral part of the evolution of the next phase of dance development in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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JUSTIN HAIU, 1ST PDNZ ARTIST IN RESIDENCE 2010

OJEY CRUZ BANKS, 2011 PHOTO: MANGERE ARTS CENTRE/PDNZ

Dr. Alys Longley, Dance Studies The University of Auckland

DANZ is an amazing resource for staff and students at Dance Studies, The University of Auckland, as it extends knowledge to new generations of dance-makers.

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