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Paper Name: Restless Dance Theatre – working towards excellence

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Introduction:

For disabled people, accessing the arts is an essential human right. Restless Dance Theatre presents real opportunities for young emerging and professional artists to collaborate on stunning, engaging and innovative new work.

In this presentation I will discuss how Restless works, the processes we undertake, some indicators that suggest excellence in what we do, and what some of the challenges are that we face.

PLAY 8 min company promotion DVD

ARTS

It's not ballet, it's not tap, jazz or hip-hop. It's not, capoeira, salsa, swing, the fox trot or the cha cha. It's not Morris, Cunningham, Humphrey, cabaret or striptease. It's not classical Persian Court, Indian Temple, the Macarena or the bus stop.

Tanztheater (dance theatre) is more than a mere 'blend' of dance and dramatic elements. It grew out of German expressionist dance. The term first appears around 1927 to identify a particular style of dance emerging from within the new forms of 'expressionist dance' developing in Central Europe since 1917. Its main exponents include Rudolf Laban, Kurt Jooss, and Mary Wigman. The term reappears in critical reviews in the 1980s to identify the work of primarily German choreographers students of Jooss (such as Pina Bausch and Reinhild Hoffman) and Wigman (Suzanne Linke).

Restless changed its name in 2008 from Restless Dance Company to Restless Dance Theatre. Simply by dropping the *company* in the name to replace it with *theatre* gives our audience a clearer description of the dance genre they can expect. Now in our 18th year, the company has achieved an enviable reputation for making highly original, large works of dance theatre.

Restless is Australia's leading dance company that works with young disabled and non-disabled dancers mostly between the ages of 15 – 27. We do not rely on using highly trained technicians to perform the work. Rather we engage young disabled people who predominantly (not exclusively) have a learning impairment and who are highly expressive in other ways. Often it can be an advantage to have a disability at Restless.

For people who are less comfortable vocalising, movement is the best alternative to put across an idea. Using movement people can be eloquent without words, they can contextualise and inform the work. They can add layers and dimensions that, for example, a ballet-trained dancer may not have.

The work of the company exists in three broad areas of activity:

- the youth ensemble
- the education (community workshop) program, and
- the professional ensemble

"Restless is a place where ... people can speak about who they are with pride, integrity and enjoyment."
Artwork Magazine

ACCESS

Sally Chance is the founding Artistic Director of Restless. The company grew out of a project she and Tania Rose led at Carclew in 1991. Before that time, there was very little in place for young disabled people to access the arts through dance projects. We are one of three funded dance companies that exist in Adelaide, and the only Australian dance company whose artistic director is disabled.

For a disabled person in Australia, accessing dance at a professional level is rare. What Restless does so well is to provide training and skills development for young people through creating innovative and unexpectedly real dance theatre productions and dance education projects. From a very early point in my career I knew I wanted to work in this area and I came through the ranks after spending seven years with the company working with all my predecessors, Sally Chance, Kat Worth, Billie Cook and Ingrid Voorendt. I also trained at the Centre for the Performing Arts and WAAPA and went on to establish my career in the UK, where disability arts is far more widely accepted, encouraged and promoted.

There are more than 40 dance companies in the UK working with disabled artists. I've worked with several of them – Candoco Dance Company, StopGAP Dance Company, Corali Dance Company, So! ...dancers, Wreckless Arts and Foot in Hand.

Disabled people in the UK have far greater access to dance programs and tertiary dance institutions because there has been a much greater investment in disability arts through government support. I think in Australia people value the arts less and play more sport. I've lived in the UK on and off for 7 years and most of the time I spent indoors – no guesses as to why that is.

One only needs to examine the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to discover and understand that here in Australia we are lagging behind other nations who are integrating cultures of disability into the mainstream.

Access in the arts is more than about a ramp leading into a building or whether you can get a wheelchair to squeeze through a bathroom door. It's about equality and providing people with *real* opportunities to participate in our community in ways that are meaningful and engaging.

In Adelaide we have the possibility to be Australia's leaders in education in the arts for disabled people. There is a lot going on. We currently have three companies delivering high quality programs for emerging artists working in dance, theatre and the visual arts. These companies are Restless Dance Theatre, No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability and Tutti Arts. However there is a problem with mainstream arts institutions in Australia.

Artists lack the training and experience to provide disabled people access to education, especially within dance programs across the country. The concept of disabled people considering a career in dance is often misunderstood. Disabled people can dance – Restless has been proving that for the past 18 years. We just have to get the Tertiary Institutions to understand that and to address the need for appropriate, accessible training for disabled dancers.

EXCELLENCE

Restless has been recognised locally, nationally and internationally within and beyond the arts scene, receiving regular funding from both State and Federal governments. We believe that both our processes and our products need to be excellent. One indicator of the excellence of our products is the awards our work has received recently.

- *The Heart of Another is a Dark Forest* won an award for Best Performance at the Melbourne Fringe 2008 and was nominated for an Outstanding Achievement in Youth or Community Dance at the Australian Dance Awards 2009.
- Our three short dance films, *Necessary Games*, took out top honours in South Australia's leading filmmaking competition after it premiered at the Adelaide Film Festival in 2009. The 18-minute work won best short film, best non-narrative film, best editing and best production design at the South Australian Screen Awards during the festival. It also won Best Experimental Short film at the Melbourne International Film Festival 2009 and has been short listed for Best Experimental at the 2009 Enhance TV ATOM Awards.

Another indication of the excellence of our work is the level of Government funding that we continue to receive.

- We are triennially funded by the Federal Government through the Australia Council's Dance Board and the Community Partnerships section indicating a level of support for and faith in the excellence of both our products and the processes we use to produce them.

Other indicators are:

- 75% of Restless staff is disabled and we employ disabled artists on our education work and through our professional ensemble we present pathways for emerging and professional disabled artists.
- In *Bedroom Dancing* our major production for 2009, 14 of the 15 performers were disabled, indicating a level of opportunity for disabled people to access the arts through our Youth Ensemble's performance program.

Here is what the dance reviewer from The Advertiser said about *Bedroom Dancing*.

Restless Dance has presented consistently impressive works by young people, especially those with a disability, for a wide audience. Bedroom Dancing is perhaps the best to date.

Other people have acknowledged our work being excellent which gives depth and resonance to what we do. Nigel Jamieson, a respected Australian theatre director, said this...

Restless Dance changes our perceptions of people with a disability every time it performs

INNOVATION:

Restless Dance Theatre's vision is to be Australia's leading youth dance company that creates unexpectedly real dance theatre works in multiple mediums to diverse audiences around the world.

Professionalism is embedded in our philosophy and in all levels of the company's operations, from our workshops with the very young to performances by both the youth and professional ensembles, and in the business and management of the company.

Although we are a youth dance company working predominantly with people with a learning disability, Restless is very much part of the mainstream dance culture here in Australia. This is evidenced by our involvement in the first Australian Youth Dance Festival in Darwin in 1997 and again at Horsham some nine years later. Adding to this, our collaboration with Australian Dance Theatre in 1995 is indicative of the quality of the collaborations we've made with leading organisations in dance culture.

Deborah Jones from The Australian (Friday October 20th 2000) wrote this about *Precious*, our work at the Sydney Paralympic Arts Festival.

Do most of the performers look different? Yes, they do (although to me, Elle Macpherson looks different too - it's just that some sorts of difference are more desirable in our society than others). Are these issues to get hung up on? No, they are not. Precious is another of those shining works that, like the best dance, confirms the power of movement to stir the imagination and the emotions... Precious is brief - scarcely more than 45 minutes - but every moment counts. If only all contemporary companies could say as much.

Restless is committed to working from a base of Cultures of Disability. Performance works take as their themes issues in the lives of the dancers but are never 'about' living a life with disability or 'about' inequality. Rather, they engage audiences with broader human themes.

The founding artistic director of the company, Sally Chance, said this...

In Restless, the dancers with a disability are the experts, The work that Restless creates is developed from the themes and issues of their experience (not necessarily disability issues) as well as their movements and imagery. The company describes this as working with 'cultures of disability'. The result is a

movement language which expresses a distinct world view and aesthetic sensibility. The dancers with a disability not only speak for themselves through the non-verbal form of dance but they 'look like themselves'.

Board – representatives from the Youth Ensemble

There are at least two dancers who are representatives on the Board of the company. Also the entire Youth Ensemble meet regularly as a sub-committee of the Board. These processes exist to give the dancers a voice, enabling them to meet regularly to discuss any issues or concerns that may arise from one production to the next. This connectedness to the dancers is central to the development of the company: for they are very much a part of our business.

Debut – the dancers direct

Offering a new opportunity to members of the youth ensemble to direct their own work, Restless presented a program in 2008 and 2009 called *Debut*. This project was modeled on Australian Dance Theatre's *Ignition* series. In 2009 first year dancers from the Adelaide Centre for the Arts joined the project and performed alongside the Restless dancers.

One of the most exciting elements of our new direction is the professional ensemble. This ensemble creates new full-length works with smaller groups of up to six disabled and non-disabled dancers. This professional ensemble provides a significant professional development opportunity for emerging disabled artists. It has been created to make a high calibre new work designed to tour.

PROCESSES:

How it involves young people.

Restless is generating a dance language that enables dancers with an intellectual disability to express human truths that communicate to everyone whether or not they have a disability. We usually recruit dancers from our workshop programs, like Restless Central which are weekly sessions throughout the school term. Its from these workshops and others that we run throughout Adelaide with schools and community groups that the artistic director invites a new dancer to trial out with the Youth Ensemble before any commitment is made to the company.

A typical pathway through Restless might be: a 15 year boy with Down syndrome joins a workshop program and comes once a week for a term. The Artistic Director attends occasional workshops and sees that this young dancer has potential and may thrive in the relatively more demanding environment of the Youth Ensemble. He is then invited to join the Youth Ensemble and begins a journey of personal and artistic growth, participating in regular technique and fitness training. At least once a year (but often twice) he dances in a major work in Adelaide. He may also find himself participating in other projects: one off performances, developmental workshops or film projects. As he matures with the company and his understanding and skills become more sophisticated, he begins to work as a tutor in the company's education team. After several years, if he shows real promise, he may well be cast in a Professional Ensemble work and could find himself touring regional Australia, capital cities or internationally. Eventually, other companies could recognise his distinctive qualities and excellent skills and he may be offered work in Australia and abroad. His career is underway. Who knows, in future

years he may develop his choreographic skills and return to Restless as a guest director and make a new work with the company.

Different Artistic Directors bring different layers of practice - a renewed approach. Each one has brought something new to the company and have all created full-length works. I never imagined I would ever be the artistic director of Restless when I joined the youth ensemble in 1999, however the thought of one day directing a work was something that I had firmly set my sights on.

It is important for the company to have strong leadership and for us to continue to make good quality work. I've inherited a 3 - year program where the directors of the works have been put in place. This enables me to draw upon my experience and the international links I've made to further develop the company's vision.

The process of creating work is equally as important as it is to choose the right directors to work with the company. The professional ensemble set up by Ingrid Voorendt, is for smaller groups of up to 6 artists to collaborate with experienced and well respected directors to create new Australian work for audiences locally, nationally and internationally. This is something I am very excited by and we look forward to taking Restless to that next stage.

Guest directors & artists

Restless seeks out experienced artists to create the work, while offering less experienced and emerging artists opportunities to gain an insight into our collaborative processes. Our resident designer, disabled artist Gaelle Mellis, is a major collaborator, designing for Restless since 1991.

Over the years Restless has worked with Liam Steele (Stan Wont Dance), Garry Stewart (Australian Dance Theatre), Kate Champion (Force Majeure), Ingrid Voorendt (Ladykillers), Michael Whaites (Link Dance Company), Kate Sulan (Rawcus), Sally Chance, Kat Worth, Paul Zivkovich, Tuula Roppola, Caroline Daish, Daisy Brown, Steve Mayhew, James Winter, Michael Hill, and Billie Cook.

Ingrid Voorendt has created several works for the company including *Safe from Harm*, the first for the Professional Ensemble. Play DVD

PRACTICES:

The works themselves

Since 1991 Restless has created 22 full-length new works and 1 triptych of short films.

The way in which work is created is through collaborative processes of the highest quality. The content of our work derives from the dancers, their life experiences adding to the complexity of the themes that exist within the work. New work is often informed by the direction of the previous work. Current issues, concepts and trends that are apparent for the members of the youth ensemble often arise within the work.

The company train with experienced artists and meet on a weekly basis throughout the year. We often spend intensive weeks for research and development in preparation of new work.

Our education program

Restless works with a wide range of age groups of people from two years old up to adult. When delivering a workshop we usually work in teams of at least 3 that are all very experienced members of Restless. There is a workshop leader responsible for the overall running of the session and two tutors who support. We often employ members of the youth ensemble on our teams. One of them usually has a learning disability. This structure ensures the quality of the workshop is of a high standard and provides professional development for emerging disabled or non-disabled artists working with us.

Some of the programs we currently run are:

- *Growth Spurt* – a workshop series for young people from the age of 2 – 4 with a suspected developmental delay. This 1 hour weekly program also engages the parent or carer of the young person.
- *Leaps and Bounds* – is a new program which was piloted at St Patricks school in Adelaide last year for young disabled people ranging in ages from 5 – 8.
- Restless Central – our ongoing program of weekly sessions for disabled and non-disabled people 15 – 27 years old. Restless Central is often the starting point for young people to transition to the Youth Ensemble.
- Regional Projects – *Restless in the Riverlands* and *The Bridging Project* were two projects we delivered in regional centres of South Australia. In 2009 we developed partnerships with Community Lifestyles Incorporated, Country Arts South Australia and the Community Partnerships section of the Australia Council to deliver two separate projects at the Berri Special School and Murray Bridge TAFE.

I'd like to read a quote from a parent involved in the Growth Spurt workshop program for 2 – 4 year olds who have a perceived disability. I think this really speaks for itself.

My daughter has started dancing a lot more. She is trying different movements. She skips more. This is a very big deal for us because she has low muscle tone and just the fact she is trying to dance is fantastic. We're very happy. I'd also like to add that we have attended lots of speech and physio appointments and they always seem like 'Therapy'. I'm always being shown techniques to help my daughter move. It feels like I'm constantly the teacher or nurse. But dancing at Growth Spurt has been fun. We're moving and in a room full of people we're only concentrating on each other. I've felt more connected to my daughter and we've had a blast. I've felt free during those sessions. Being a carer/parent we carry a lot of stress and worry about our children, but Growth Spurt has allowed me to forget about it all and just see my daughter for who she is, and I never felt self-conscious in any of the sessions - the team's enthusiasm for dancing and the children counteracted any inhibitions I may have felt. Thank you all so much.

SUMMARY:

There is a major challenge in terms of education and it's a two-step problem

Firstly How we train professionals to value and deliver training programs for disabled dancers of the highest quality

and secondly How we encourage and support opportunities for disabled people to transition from non-formal education to more formal tertiary dance institutions

And for Restless, there is another challenge...

How we as a company engage, maintain and develop new audiences – touring market

What image or photograph expresses or illustrates the idea?