

Meredith Dooley, Company Manager, was just back in Wellington after the New Zealand-wide tour of the TOWER Season of From Here to There when she spoke to Wellington Friend Judith Doyle about her role in the Royal New Zealand Ballet and her life in the arts.



"Welcome to my world," Meredith Dooley said to me at a table in The Jimmy cafe at the St James. Not only because we were physically in 'her world' but also because she had just been advising an anxious dancer who was feeling ill, about what steps to take and where to go for medical help if needed. Just one of the many calls on her in her role as Company Manager.

"The job is largely about tour management," she said. Although she was 'at home' when we spoke, the Wellington performances of the TOWER Season of *From Here to There* is still regarded as part of the New Zealand-wide tour. Her job is not concerned with the logistics of getting the production from town to town, it's more focused on the dancers — their accommodation and their transport.

"I am the liaison between the company and the venues. I need to familiarise myself with everything in the venue. The managers will come to me if there is an issue to sort out," Meredith said. "I set up the dancers' noticeboard, updating them with times, functions and casting for that night. I am also the spare person on tour — if somebody twists an ankle, I'll be the one who takes them to get it seen to."

This last tour, being a triple bill rather than one of the larger narrative ballets, has been relatively light on extra duties. It did not include children, for instance —
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RAFFLE

Please help us to keep our dancers on their toes by supporting our raffle — this is our major fundraising event for the year and there are some great prizes to be won including a luxury weekend in Queenstown!

Graham Murphy DVDs

reviewed by Jennifer Shennan

Two DVDs of Graeme Murphy's choreography in productions by The Australian Ballet will prove treasure, both for those who saw the live originals, as well as those who missed them.

His production of *Nutcracker - the story of Clara* (filmed in 1994) centres around a brilliant concept for an Australian setting of the classic tale. An elderly woman (here played by Margaret Scott), listening to her radio playing Tchaikovsky's music, is drawn back to her memories of dancing Clara as a young girl. There are poignant themes of migration and memory, of both good and troubled times, of youth and of age. Her circle of friends visit to celebrate the festive season, and amongst these, a handsome elderly gentleman (known to you and me as Harry Haythorne) brings style, charm and pathos to the Prologue that so movingly opens this ballet. The treatment of storybook characters in fantasy and imagination is second to none, and the inventive layers of theatrical effect and time travel will satisfy both adult as well as younger audiences. It's a classic.

Swan Lake (filmed in 2008) is further evidence of Murphy's genius for placing dance within such an enveloping surround of theatre. He has always staged adagio movement with greater command than any other choreographer I can think of. (Who of us remembers RNZB in *Orfeo* in the Stravinsky celebration season of 1982? and *The Protecting Veil*, in 1997? and Sydney Dance Company performing *Some Rooms* in the first International Festival of the Arts in 1986?) This *Swan Lake*, a breathtakingly beautiful achievement, is a wonder.

always delightful but also challenging and not too many functions were on the agenda either. "Unlike *Peter Pan* which was full-on. I hardly came up for breath," she said. There was an extra dimension to this recent tour, however, in the form of a TV3 documentary series being shot, telling the trials, tribulations and triumphs of a ballet company on tour. It involved one main camera and several smaller ones. "Fingers crossed, it should be shown just before the Meridian Season of *Carmen* which would be wonderful," she said, "but a time slot is not finalised yet."

Meredith's last job in the company was as Artistic Co-ordinator and much of her work at that time involved a big project — getting all the company's old recordings which were on ageing video tapes transferred to DVDs. "I was doing my everyday work around it but that was going on in the background!" Everyday work included such things as keeping the accounts for the artistic department and helping with scheduling for the dancers.

Meredith's involvement in the arts is long-standing. She started learning ballet at the age of four, here in Wellington, with Deirdre Tarrant. She continued for about five years but then found that she was not quite ready for the total commitment. "I stopped ballet but carried on doing jazz dancing and dance-drama — I was always making up plays at school. I became more interested in acting and later at Victoria University studied theatre and film. I was also very interested in languages and linguistics.

After University, London beckoned — her parents are English — and she enrolled in a small drama school in London. She also started ushering at the English National Opera in the evenings. After graduating from drama school, she spent some 18 months in theatre management at the ENO who have their own theatre - the London Coliseum. She loved sitting in on rehearsals and working in the theatre world, but the reality of being financially skint in London lost its appeal after a while and she returned to New Zealand at the beginning of the year 2000.

In Wellington she worked for a few years in sound post-production on *Lord of the Rings*. "A little bit of a tangent, but the same general area," she said and after that at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. Here she helped to organise the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior events when the remains of a New Zealand soldier were brought home from France to be interred at the War Memorial. With the formal procession through town and the military ceremony at the Memorial, it was rather like staging a production. But she was anxious to get back to a hands-on theatre job and the Artistic Co-ordinator's position at the RNZB came up just at the right moment. Very soon after moving into the Company Manager job, she was thrown in the deep end — the China tour. "It is so different, China. Different ways of working...different language... lots of red tape."

She remembers the battle of the company curtains when the Chinese thought the company's curtain did not comply with Chinese safety regulations. Also, although many Chinese theatres are technologically advanced, bureaucracy reigns. Chinese technicians had to 'press the buttons' following instructions from RNZB technicians!

Meredith was needed in the background to try and smooth over little hiccoughs, something that she has become very adept at. She will be part of the team going to China later this year —third tour for her and hopefully, 'third time lucky' as far as knowing the ropes is concerned.

Pointes to Note

- The National AGM & Conference of the Friends of the Royal New Zealand Ballet will be held on Level 3, St James Theatre, 77-83 Courtenay Place, Wellington on 31 July & 1 August 2010.
- Keep up with the RNZB on Facebook. Become a fan and you'll be the first to see new photographs, get company news, the latest reviews and special offers.
- For information about events in your area during the Meridian Season of *Carmen* visit www.nzballet.org.nz/community
There will be **Q & A** sessions in Wellington (12 June), Christchurch (26 June), and Auckland (10 July).
Warm Up, Curtain Up will take place in Invercargill (18 June), Christchurch (25 June), and Auckland (8 July).
There will be a **Forum** in Wellington (6 June).

When it comes to fitness and footwork, dancers top the premier league, but can you really compare football and ballet?

According to Dance UK, dance is second only to football as the most popular activity for school-children. And it's not just kids: between 11m and 12m people have watched the final of the BBC's Strictly Come Dancing annually since 2006.

One form, however, has so far resisted the reality format, for a simple reason: it's too hard. Ballet, with its demands of contortion, balance and strength, requires a level of physical ability and mental concentration that is rarely equaled elsewhere, not merely in dance, but also in sport.

Read more in the article by Paul Croughton in Sunday Times, 21 March 2010:

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/dance/article7065562.ece

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