

Dancing on the Media

by Maria Gill

Shona McCullagh dreams of one day creating a modern vaudevillian show in a seedy place. She says it would create a sense of community across breeds of artists, which is lacking at the moment.

“I am always looking for something that is fresh and original and has a core that is truly creative and is borne from some spring of inventiveness.”

It is this inventive and risk-taking approach to her work that has led to her huge international success as a dancer, choreographer and film director.

Since hanging up her dance shoes McCullagh has worked amongst many different communities. She has choreographed dances for major films such as King Kong, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and her own short films; ‘Hurtle’, ‘Break’ and ‘Fly’. She has just finished researching a software program that uses a synthesis of movement, music and technology. She will soon direct the Royal New Zealand’s ballet ‘The Nutcracker’ for a Christmas special on TVNZ. In between projects she manages her two businesses; Human Garden Productions, which provides creative concepts for a range of businesses and The Human Garden Agency, which provides performers for film, television and live events.

It is because of her passion to encourage dancers to broaden their professional development and become more skilled in other areas that she began The Human Garden Agency. McCullagh says it was difficult getting the business going at first because parts of the dance community were not used to the idea that it was acceptable and productive to have professional representation and producers resisted paying better rates for dancers. Internationally, it is an absolute given that performers require professional representation but this idea has been slow to gain support here in New Zealand.

McCullagh points to a poverty mentality, lack of knowledge about how to market oneself as a performer adequately and a kind of snobbishness about earning money in the commercial sector as some of the reasoning behind this. Despite this, the agency has grown from strength to strength, often solely casting dance scenes in feature films. She now has over 680 dancers and specialist physical performers on the books, servicing many aspects of the industry.

McCullagh says dancers could get more work if they were versatile.

“Most contemporary choreographers and dancers cannot survive on the art world alone. I’m very keen to create opportunities for people to have both.”

Juggling the corporate vs. the art world is something that McCullagh has done for a long time. It is this willingness to take risks that sees her forging into new territory such as technology.

McCullagh likes the idea of creating meaning out of the combination of technology and humanity. When McCullagh was awarded the Creative New Zealand’s inaugural Senior Choreographic Fellowship it gave her an opportunity to spend four weeks researching a software product called ‘Isadora’.

Isadora was developed in the United States by Troika Ranch and is designed to support interactive performance whereby the performer acts as a trigger for various media such as projection, light and sound. She explains that by using senses such as a video camera lens or sound sensors the performer and the software work together to create other elements in the space.

John Gibson, her partner and a composer, worked with her on the project and they finished it in June this year. Once it is written up and edited she will present the material to potential users, which could be art galleries, schools and tertiary institutions. She envisages designing installations that inspire children to express themselves physically or creating public space installations that are playful and inspire curiosity.

She says with a hint of a smile that she could imagine it in the public arena.

“Even bringing it into public wash room facilities and something creative happening, whether it is sound or projection or whatever.”

McCullagh has also been working on a ‘Hyper Vortex’ project in collaboration with some faculty members of the University of Auckland. They are developing software that recognises movement and inspires collaboration between life form and technology. It is a huge project just in its infancy and she fits it in between other projects.

However, McCullagh balances this curiosity with technology with a healthy skepticism. She does not want to create plastic two dimensional performances but wants to use technology to enhance the vulnerability of humanity and create imagery that is sensitive and beautiful.

“Once you have recorded something the breath has been removed. You cannot supercede the simplicity of a body moving in space and the audience sensing the presentness of that performance.”

McCullagh has also been experimenting with bodies moving in space by working with aerial and grounded performers at the same time. When working on a fundraiser for the NBR Opera New Zealand Company she combined a circus suspension act with Indian classical dance to make a Bollywood event.

Next year she will be developing a concept for the New Zealand Woman’s awards. She wants to integrate opera, aerial, trapeze and ground performers and use fabric as a component of the choreography.

McCullagh enjoys working with circus performers because they are hungry to bounce off creative ideas. She recently used circus artists for several corporate events creating performances that used theatrics and narration so it gave the artists a rational reason for them to do their ‘tricks’.

She would love to see more collaboration with cross breed of performers as these environments can be very inspiring and creative for all those involved. Like the vaudevillian project she would like to do one day. She says it is important to create work that has integrity, honesty and does not take itself completely seriously.

In the mean time, next year is shaping up to be another busy and varied year for her with 'Break' McCullagh's own film's release and other eclectic projects: a play, choreography for the New Zealand School of Dance and a New York musical film.

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