

Exactly three years ago this September, Amanda Skoog returned from overseas and took up her role as General Manager of the Royal New Zealand Ballet. She talks to Wellington Friend Judith Doyle



"I like steering the ship; I like the involvement with people and I like seeing a happy team," said Amanda Skoog, General Manager of the company, "and to be able to do that in a dance organisation is the icing on the cake."

Defining the general manager's job is not easy as it involves looking after so many parts of the jigsaw that is the Royal New Zealand Ballet. But in a nutshell: Amanda as general manager must raise the money. Gary Harris as artistic director spends it!

"I have to ensure that we have sufficient funding from all the various sources to put on a really good show at the level that Gary would like and that we have an audience to appreciate that show," she said.

Earning the money includes liaison with the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and the RNZB Board of Trustees; overseeing marketing and development; corporate sponsorship; individual giving, trusts and foundations. Then there is the overview of all the human resources throughout the organisation.

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From the 2009 AGM & Conference

- A cheque for \$50,000 was presented to Amanda Skoog. Amanda has asked us to tell our members how truly grateful the RNZB is for all the work the Friends do on their behalf.
- Members of the National Committee for 2010 are Debbie Tangen (Wairarapa, National President), Lee Patrice (Hawke's Bay), Peter Cowley (Wellington), Linda Parsons (Canterbury), Christine Connor (Wairarapa), Celia Davison and Diana Maher (Auckland), and Peter Cowley (Wellington).
- Dance Historian, Jennifer Shennan addressed the meeting and spoke about her current project which is a biography of Poul Gnatt, founder of the RNZB. Jennifer has asked to be sent any story or treasured memory of Poul – she asks you to "keep the writing clean and clear – poetic if you like". Dates and places are important and contributions would be acknowledged in the book.
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Pointes to note

- Preferential bookings for all 2010 RNZB seasons open for existing subscribers on Monday 5 October 2009 and for Friends of the Ballet on Monday 19 October.
- As it is not easy to prove membership when booking tickets to RNZB performances online, Friends who cannot book in person at a box office should call **0800 4 DANCE** and purchase tickets with the Friends discount this way.
- In an effort to reduce its impact on the environment the RNZB will no longer distribute printed cast sheets at performances but there will be hard copies available for anyone who would like one. These will be located near the screens showing the casting information electronically.
- Signed photos of Sir Jon Trimmer in the Meridian Season of *Don Quixote* are available for purchase from the RNZB at \$10 each.

"I like administration; getting things done; pulling all the strings together," she said. Amanda's background is tailor-made for the sort of job she's doing now. She has worked in arts administration for the past 17 years, including the English National Ballet, London's Design Museum and Central School of Ballet. She has a post-graduate Diploma in Arts Administration from City University, London. In New Zealand she has previously been Executive Director of Dance Aotearoa New Zealand and a dance assessor for Creative New Zealand.

All this and a long background as a classical ballet dancer. She left New Zealand as a teenager to pursue her career and toured Europe extensively.

Amanda has a special interest in education and thinks it was most fortuitous that the appointment of an education officer was made at the same time as she took up her role as general manager. "It was the right timing to develop that arm of the company," she said. "I strongly believe, because we are Ministry-funded, that we have a duty to go out to the taxpayers of New Zealand and give something back to them. We are a national company. Tutus on Tour furthers this too, of course."

"Education is a huge growth area. We are focussing on the boys too. I think that's important. We get a lot of support from the artistic team and from the dancers to do that. Not only because they are the audience of tomorrow. But also because we still fight the perception of dance and what the value of a ballet company is. The education unit changes people's preconceived ideas about ballet. It broadens the whole view of what a ballet company is. For instance when we're on television on Christmas Day, it won't be 'oh! ballet' and switch off. Rather 'oh, I remember them. They came to my school.' It's also about production, wardrobe, the whole business of ballet. It gives the dancers a valuable link to their audience and their communities too."

Although there has always been a considerable turnover of dancers, she believes that in a small isolated country it is almost inevitable. Ballet is international and a dancer's life is short.

"I think it's healthy that a dancer goes away. Not that you want it — you're sad to say goodbye to them. But they get to see the standards; what the conditions are like and to realise that the RNZB offers them huge opportunities to dance a wide variety of repertoire that they wouldn't necessarily get in a big company overseas. They have got to experience that for themselves."

Recent research shows that dancers are staying a bit longer now — the average being about five years. It's important that when they go away, they want to come back and keep a connection with the company and this has been happening more and more lately.

The company is also attracting a higher calibre of dancer now. "Sometimes we struggle to keep the dancers who would mature into great principals and stay on. So we have a very young company; a big gap; and then lovely Jon Trimmer at the top as the role model."

International touring, like the 2-week tour of China with *Romeo and Juliet* earlier this year, is crucial to the company. "It is great for professional development of the whole company," she said, "myself included." It is stimulating and exciting to the dancers who need to perform as much as possible to keep motivated and fit. Touring is financially advantageous as, in China anyway, the company is paid fees by the venues to perform. So, although the company does not take the box office income, it takes no risk either. The tour also raises New Zealand's profile in an important market. This does not go amiss where our trade and industry interests are concerned.

For the production side of the company it was a challenge. First, the language barrier when dealing with a local crew. Second, the bureaucracy. Although they had sophisticated technology, they were sometimes a bit reluctant to use it! "*Romeo and Juliet* has a revolve, for instance, but they didn't want it to be screwed into the floor. So we had a roaming revolve — a matter of No 8 wire and some very strong double-sided tape!"

They visited Wuhan, Zhengzhou and Shanghai and facilities in each theatre were extraordinarily good. In fact the visit was such a resounding success that the company is returning to Shanghai next year to perform at the World Expo.

Dancer Portraits by Maarten Holl

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/local/slideshows/dancer-portraits>

These are portraits of RNZB dancers taken before and directly after class revealing the person behind the dancer.

Peter Pan Events

During the *Peter Pan* season you can see **Warming Up, Curtain Up** in Invercargill, Palmerston North, Auckland and Hamilton;

Q & A in Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland; and **Forum** in Dunedin. There is also a **Theatre Tour** in Wellington on Thursday 5 November.

For details and to register online go to: nzballet.org.nz/education or call 04 381 9001.

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