

Behind the scenes

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2005

Alexander Grant

New Zealand Arts Foundation Icon 2005



Every two years the Arts Foundation honours leading arts practitioners as Icon Artists of whom there will only ever be twenty at any one time. Each Icon Artist receives a medallion and pin designed by stone sculptor John Edgar. The artist keeps the pin in perpetuity, while the medallion, following the artist's death, will be presented to a successor.

Alexander Grant, who was recently made a New Zealand Icon has been called the greatest male dancer ever produced by a British company – an amazing accomplishment for a New Zealander born in 1925 and raised in Wellington where he learned ballet with Kathleen O'Brien and later Jean Horne.

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Alexander won a Royal Academy of Dance scholarship to study in London and within two months of arriving in England in 1946, he joined the newly formed Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet. After only two weeks of his first tour he was asked to join the main company. Less than a year after his arrival in London he was a soloist. Both Massine and Frederick Ashton created roles for him, and he partnered Margot Fonteyn.

The Jester in Ashton's Cinderella was his first famous characterisation and many others followed.

In 1964 Alexander returned to New Zealand as the guest of the Royal New Zealand Ballet where he danced the leading role in Russell Kerr's (2003 Icon) production of Fokine's Petrouchka.

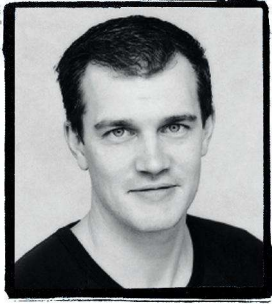
In the 1970s Alexander directed the Royal Ballet's educational group, Ballet for All and for seven years was director of the National Ballet of Canada. Today he is still active in coaching, judging and producing ballet.

In 1997 he returned to New Zealand from London to stage *La Fille Mal Gardée* for the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

Born into the theatre

Wellington Friend Judith Doyle talked with Andrew Lees, Technical Stage Manager of the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

Andrew Lees, the company's Technical Stage Manager, comes from a theatrical dynasty. He and his sister grew up in the industry - as a child he would sleep in the basement of theatres!



Andrew Lees, Technical Stage Manager

His father, An Lees - Wellington born and bred but living in Sydney - is a theatre designer for ballet, opera and film who designed *Swan Lake* for the company at only 17 years of age, later *Hamlet*, then *Romeo and Juliet*. Andrew's mother owned a dancewear manufacturing company and his cousins, all females, danced. "With my cousins, I would be picked up after school and then I'd go and sit while they did ballet class," he said. His grandparents on both sides of the family were involved in the theatre.

Clinching the theatrical tradition, Andrew is married to dancer Nadine Tyson who retired from the company last year after a stellar career. Their little son Guy was born in July. What's the betting on him continuing the family's theatrical tradition?

Andrew did not intend to get into the theatre initially. When he left school in Sydney he worked in an international hotel while he was studying fine arts. Then he started working in night-clubs as a barman but his technical skills were quickly discovered and he was drawn into that aspect.

Later came big dance parties in the late 80s, early 90s, with some work in opera too. He'd had enough of Sydney by '92 and moved to New Zealand. He started touring lots of big musicals round the world - Japan, Korea, America - and at the end of 1996 joined the ballet company as Technical Stage Manager.

With a new show, the first task for a Technical Stage Manager is forming an overview of the logistics and how it is all going to work and run, technically.

Andrew receives a set design (basic plans and models) and then works out how it is going to hang in the theatre by making a hanging plot. (Visualise the height up to the theatre's proscenium, double it and add a little bit more. That's where the scenery and the lighting bars are located, suspended from battens).

Lowering and ascending this equipment smoothly and safely is a complex matter of balance and counterweights. You can either 'fly' equipment off counterweights which requires less effort since it's balanced, or off hand-lines which involves taking all the weight.

Next he tackles the ground plan of where it's all going to be placed on the back truck as he calls it - a big wagon that rolls up and down stage carrying all the steel work etc. In the case of the coming production of *The Nutcracker*, this depicts a hospital wall. This ground plan used to be drafted on paper on a drawing board. Now Andrew works on a fancy computer called a plotter, which looks a bit like a very wide and impressive photocopying or printing machine. This draws to scale. It can be blown up to the point where it shows all the nuts and bolts on the wheels. The plotter can also produce a 3D plan. Andrew spends a lot of time on this ground plan which basically shows how the set is going to be built in the company's workshops.

Our company is a touring one, so when Andrew is turning the designer's plans into construction drawings, he must work out not only the process of putting together and getting it up, but also how best to build a set that can be transported on the roads (five trucks were needed for *Dracula*, for instance).

Yet another dimension is to be aware of the capacity and idiosyncrasies of the various theatres around the country - many have been done up now, thankfully. "I basically standardise the set so that it can go into every venue that we play," he said. "There are various degrees of quality of venue, of course."

As examples: Wellington's St James stage is pretty deep; the Aotea's in Auckland is quite wide; Dunedin has an antiquated flying system and Hamilton does have counterweights but only in certain places. So Technical Stage Manager is a combination of skills in carpentry, engineering, steelwork, rigging. It's a vital part of the jigsaw that is a professional ballet production.

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Dancer Spotlight

Chantelle Kerr



Photo: Stephen A'Court

“She is one to watch!”

This is what Ann Hunt writing in the Sunday Star Times had to say about Chantelle Kerr’s performance in Sir Kenneth MacMillan’s *Concerto*, one of the ballets from the recent Royal New Zealand Ballet’s triple bill, *A Million Kisses to My Skin*. She went on to say, “the second movement – an exquisite pas de deux - was eloquently danced by Chantelle Kerr and newcomer Michael Braun. Kerr’s fine technical and interpretive abilities are illuminated by an inner sensitivity”.

Chantelle garnered accolades from dance critics all around the country. Among them, Deidre Tarrant in Capital Times noted her “sublime disregard for gravity” in *A Million Kisses to My Skin*. The Dominion Post said, “Kerr’s strong interpretive abilities and eloquent lines were outstanding”. The Christchurch Star said, “her performance of the second movement was breathtaking in its romantic perfection”.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the 24 year old Chantelle classes David Dawson’s ballet *A Million Kisses to My Skin* as her favourite to date. Asked if she prefers classical or contemporary dance she says, “When I was younger I definitely would have preferred classical, but the older I get, the more modern works are appealing to me and there is phenomenal new repertoire being created every day!”

Chantelle studied with the Christine Walsh Dance Centre in Melbourne and the Queensland Ballet where she was a trainee dancer in 2003. In 2004 she crossed the Tasman to join the RNZB – she misses the relaxed lifestyle that comes with the tropical Queensland weather, but she loves the regular touring that comes with the job here and the opportunity to see so much of New Zealand.

When the company performed in Sydney recently, some of her former ballet teachers took the opportunity to come to see her dance and she looked forward to her family returning to New Zealand and seeing her dance in *Dracula*.



Nicola Blackman

Company Manager Extraordinaire

It is hard to imagine Nicola Blackman staying still in one place for long, but that is what she is planning to do for a while when she retires as RNZB Company Manager at the end of the *Dracula* tour (she has promised herself a month's sleep before she embarks on life as a freelancer!) She is also looking forward to being able to turn off her phone and to knowing which city or town she is in when she wakes up in the morning!

Nicola is truly a veteran tourer. Before joining the Royal New Zealand Ballet in 2002, she spent two years working at the Edge in Auckland, but prior to that Nicola toured widely in New Zealand, Australia, and Asia for 10 years. She worked in stage management with Auckland Opera, the Adelaide Festival, Melbourne Theatre Company and other musical and theatrical groups.

Since joining the company Nicola has travelled with the company on twelve national tours (including two Tutus on Tour - she loved these so much she would sign up for another in a heartbeat), and accompanied them to the UK, Tasmania, San Francisco and Sydney. The pleasure of Tutus on Tour was in travelling to all the different venues around New Zealand and working with the local arts communities.

A typical day on tour begins two hours before the company assembles for class, when she facilitates any publicity calls for the dancers scheduled for that day, makes physio appointments, and organises any backstage tours or groups coming to watch class. She prints off the cast sheets – maybe up to 900, briefs the ushers, checks that any social functions will run smoothly and that any ticket pickups (including the inevitable lost ticket passes) are at the box office.

Then when the audience is seated it is Nicola who gives the all clear to stage management that the performance can begin and supervises the interval timings. Once the curtain falls, she makes sure the dancers get to any post show functions and are safely on their way home at the end of the night.

All this, and she always manages to look totally calm and in control – apart from the odd kick at the photocopier when it seizes up yet again!

Back in the office, her duties include planning tour itineraries, arranging the accommodation and travel for the company on tour (for the Tutus on Tour this involves working 18 months ahead!), and arranging contracts for the venues.

An absolute highlight of her time with the company has been her relationship with the Friends of the Ballet. “Their commitment never ceases to amaze me! And it is so wonderful to know you can count on familiar faces who are so supportive and happy to help out with anything from lattes and fresh fruit to nannies!”

Another special memory will be the Young Friends of the Ballet she has met on her travels – “their eager faces and passion for ballet are so great to see!”

The Friends wish Nicola well in all her new endeavors.

Pointes to Note

- **Thanks to the generous support of our wonderful members, the Friends of the Ballet recently presented the Royal New Zealand Ballet with a cheque for \$25,000 to help fund the dancers' shoes.**
- Ou Lu, an Honorary Life Member of the Friends of the Ballet returned briefly from China to teach Dracula. He found lots of new faces but enjoyed the return to familiar surroundings. It is a very different scene from the Beijing Dance Academy where Lu is teaching which has 140 students and draws from a School of Dance with over 1000 students!
- Pamela May died recently in London aged 88. She was born Doris May but when she joined Sadler's Wells Ballet School, Ninette de Valois told her “the Prelude in Les Sylphide cannot be danced by Doris May!” Close friend of Margot Fonteyn and known for her elegance and blonde beauty she was dubbed the “connoisseur's prima ballerina”. She was also a dab hand at strip poker, which she played with men, striking terror into the heart of any young female dancer she invited to join in!

What's On!

Diwali Festival

22 - 23 October, Wellington Town Hall, Capital E and Civic Square

Diwali is one of the most celebrated and important festivities in Indian culture. It

is known as the 'Festival of Lights'. Traditionally, lighting lamps at Diwali expresses happiness and welcomes light and prosperity.

Diwali is a time for fun and festivity for Wellington's local communities and an opportunity to share and celebrate culture. Last year there were over 600 participants showcasing Indian music, dance, food and culture. The event was enjoyed by more than 35,000 people.

This year the Bollywood Dance Competition will take place the night before the main festival.

- 22 October - The Bollywood Dance Competition
- 23 October - Diwali Festival day



Diwali dancer

Wellington Friends

The Nutcracker

Full Technical Dress Rehearsal Thursday 27 October – 7 pm

For just \$25.00 you can bring a friend to see the Ballet – Numbers strictly limited.

Collect your tickets from Friends Committee members on the first floor of the St. James theatre.

Note: Tickets are Non-refundable.

Nutcracker Forum

Join the friends in learning more of the secrets “behind the scenes”.

See included booking form!

Crackers, Coffee & Conversation

Just when you thought an evening at the ballet could not get any better...it has!!

We are organising a group booking (15% discount off the retail seat prices) to Nutcracker on Friday 4 November, **preceded** by coffee & nibbles (and good company!) in the Dennis Adams Suite (on the right of the Ticketek Kiosk) starting at **5:30 pm**.

Note the earlier start time!!

If you have already booked then join us for the Coffee and Conversation we would love to see you.

See included booking form!

And the Winners are:

At the beginning of the year we offered several copies of “A time to dance” the Royal New Zealand Ballet’s 50th anniversary book by Jennifer Shennan for the first five renewals of the year!

The winners are - Dr & Mrs John Hall, Shirley & Ken Shanks, Patricia Devenoges, Annette Austing.

A unique Christmas Gift idea!

Have you considered a *Young Friends* membership as a unique Christmas Gift idea? There is a form included if you feel this is a brilliant idea to encourage a youngster and foster their interest in dance.

Company tour San Francisco/Sydney

Our Sponsored dancer, Rowan Cann, wrote a note to us about his experience in San Francisco and Sydney.

Dear Friends!

Just a quick note to fill you in on last tour. Our trip to San Francisco and Sydney was fantastic. It was my first time on U.S. soil. Once we survived security in L.A., the Americans were very friendly and welcoming. San Francisco was nice and warm, t-shirts & shorts during the day, though it got quite chilly in the evenings. Boy did I shop! Everything was such value.

The performances went well, it was well received with good audiences for our 2 shows.

Then on to Sydney. We were in the Sydney Theatre which is down near The Rocks, a beautiful new theatre which has incorporated the original structure of two wharf Bond Stores. It was nice to visit again and to catch up with some Aussie friends and some friends from high school. All in all it was an awesome opportunity and we got to show our talent to the world.

Luv, Rowan

World of Wearable Arts

This fabulous show has gone from strength to strength so much that it has outgrown its home in Nelson and lucky Wellington is now its new home. This makes it much more accessible for us!

If you have purchased tickets for the show and for the Friends pre-show drinks & nibbles meet up at the Loaded Hog (Queens Wharf at the end of Whitmore Street) Sunday 2 October, 4:30 pm. We will depart for the show at 5:45 – it is 300 metres along at the Queens Wharf Events Centre!

Ballet Binoculars \$20 + P&P

These high quality binoculars

come in a smart soft black case (9.5 x 7 x 4 cm) perfect for a close-up view at the ballet, opera or sports and fit easily into purse or pocket. These great NorWest binoculars are 8 x 21 and can be ordered from Susie Clark, Friends Administrator.



Why Martial Artists make Better Dancers?

The Link between Martial Arts and Dancing

Did you know that Bruce Lee - perhaps one of the greatest legends in martial arts - was also Hong Kong Cha Cha Champion in 1958? Indeed, Bruce Lee was an accomplished Latin dancer in his home town of Hong Kong before moving to the US to study and develop his martial arts system of Jeet Kune Do (Way of the Intercepting Fist).

So what was it about dancing that the young Bruce found so interesting, when the rest of the world would only know him for his fighting skills?

Well here is one good reason: great dancing needs a lot of talent in all the right dance areas, including balance, timing, co-ordination, foot work and sensitivity. Superior martial artists require many of the same skills, often overlooked by power-hungry males! Martial artists that understand and develop these elusive qualities often naturally move to translate these skills to the dance floor!

The opposite scenario of course applies too: talented dancers are at a huge advantage when starting off in the martial arts. Bringing with them rhythm, timing, physical awareness and flexibility, the transition from dancing to martial arts can be a hugely rewarding one. While the diversions and enjoyment of dancing are multiple, the inner sense of confidence that martial arts can provide is second to none. A prime quality shared by both dancers and martial artists is the ability to work with a partner, that is, "the lead". To be able to read your partner and follow their movements correctly in both time and space, whilst remaining balanced so that the two of you are in total harmony, is at the core of the true martial arts experience.



Anticipating each others intentions and therefore compensating for every possible error in judgement, whether by fault of balance or mistimed movement, is equally critical. In martial arts the action can be a little more intense, but the speed and tempo of great Latin dancing can also approach "fast and furious"

You have to execute your skills in defined area and even utilise your peripheral awareness (non-focused lateral visual contact) to avoid collisions on the dance floor.

Sensitivity of the palm and wrist to directional control in order to lead and spin is also used in the martial arts of Wing Chun and Tai Chi, and other systems where perception, awareness, sensitivity and control are highly valued, not just power.

It is interesting to observe that many of the dance moves used today could have come straight out of martial arts "text books" written thousands of years ago. A performance move often seen in partner dancing involves the man sweeping his right leg up and over his outstretched left hand, momentarily breaking contact with his partner, in martial arts otherwise known as an outside crescent kick! Or how about the dynamic spinning routines in break dance where the performer starts by twirling his legs overhead, spins on his back, and then pops onto his hands? No better example can be found than Jet Li's Wu Shu exhibitions in the movie Once Upon a Time in China! Then, of course, there is the example of Capoeira, a beautiful and powerful fusion of Brazilian rhythms, music, dance and martial arts.

Many of the skills at work in dance are just as applicable to the martial arts, and especially in that of Kung Fu where you are not just employing power but all the subtle talents of dancing as well.

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