

# **Phantom Limbs: Researching a New Zealand Dance Company**

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History has no existence before it is written

(Howell, & Prevenier 2001).

In 1998, while completing my MA in Performing Arts at Middlesex University in London, I was introduced to a young New Zealand dance student at a party. He asked of my dance background. I explained to him that I had come to New Zealand from New York in the late 1980s and that I had been a member of Limbs Dance Company in Auckland not long before it had folded. He immediately began asking me questions about Limbs- was it true that the studio had been deliberately set on fire to collect the insurance, had so and so been in the company, why did it fold, etc. etc.? It was at that moment that I decided that when I returned to New Zealand I would write the history of Limbs Dance Company. For here, standing before me was a young New Zealand dancer, a graduate of the New Zealand School of Dance, who seemed to know nothing, or very little, of Limbs, a company that was an essential component of New Zealand dance and was a significant part of his heritage, a dance company which in fact defined dance in New Zealand for 12 years. It would have been unthinkable having a similar conversation with a fine arts graduate who was ignorant of prominent New Zealand artists such as Colin McCahon or Philip Clairmont. Or a music school graduate who could not discuss the works or life of Jack Body or Douglas Lilburn. So, six years later, here I am, talking to you about my process and journey of discovery in researching and writing a dance history. By telling this story I hope that you can appreciate the scope of the Limbs' output in addition to its contribution to New Zealand cultural history. Historians Howell and Prevenier state: "All cultures, all peoples, tell stories about themselves, and it is these stories that help provide the meanings that make a culture" (Howell, & Prevenier 2001, p.1).

Dance history from our part of the world is not generally known or studied in the greater dance studies arena. In Jack Anderson's 1997 book, *Art without Boundaries - The World of Modern Dance*, there is a chapter entitled "A League of Dancing Nations". This chapter highlights dance from places other than Europe and North America. In this 340 page book, New Zealand's entire 20th Century dance history is contained in one sentence, mentioning one artist. On page 289, Anderson has written this paragraph:

Several Australian and New Zealand dancers who have worked abroad have returned to choreograph in their native lands- for instance, Meryl Tankard, an Australian-born former member of Pina Bausch's troupe, and Douglas Wright, a New Zealand dancer who performed with Paul Taylor" (Anderson 1997, p289).

In order to be recognized outside our region our artists have had to have worked elsewhere to achieve credibility.

Closer to home we have a handful of books which chronicle our dance history. Jan Bowell's 1991 biographical essay on choreographer Susan Jordan stands alone on bookshelves catering to New Zealand dance artists, but at 46 pages long it certainly can not be considered a substantial source of information. Shona Dunlop MacTavish, one of our pioneer modern dancers and a former Bodenwieser dancer, has written the story of her dance career which was published in 1997. A book of our famous nude "gold dancer" from the 1940s, Freda Stark, was published in 2000. In 2003, The Royal New Zealand Ballet published its own celebratory history marking its 50 years of existence and Douglas Wright's 'fictional auto-biography' has just been released.

Since 2003 dance has been a core curriculum subject in all New Zealand schools up to Year 8 (age 12-13) yet the resources available to teachers are scant. A few choreographers and companies have made videos/ CD roms to use in schools but these seemed to be aimed at secondary level students and show excerpts of

choreography or dance films. The Ministry of Education has supplied dance ideas for use in the classroom on its website but no biographical or historical material on New Zealand dance. This lack of available information on New Zealand dance coupled with the fascinating story that I knew lay undiscovered of a successful, innovative modern dance company at the end of the world, prompted me to commence my research.

I began by talking to people who had been members of Limbs and locating archival material, held privately and publicly. I am fortunate since most ex- Limbs' dancers are still alive and still live or have returned to live, in New Zealand. And being the small country that it is, I also know a lot of them personally. Next, I spent about a year trawling through the Limbs' archive held at the Auckland Public Library Special Collections in the central city. The library was given all Limbs' archival material when the company folded in 1989. I also used the New Zealand Film Archive, which holds the Alan Stuart collection of Limbs videos from 1977-1989. Now I was ready to begin the hard work, the collating of material and the writing, for as all researchers will tell you, researching is the fun, easy, part.

In 2001, I applied for a writing grant from Creative New Zealand's literature panel. At the time I was serving on a peer assessment panel for the dance awards. Once my application had been lodged I received a call from the literature advisor asking why my application had come to them. "Shouldn't it be assessed by the dance panel? Was it because I was on presently serving as a dance panel member that I didn't want it assessed there?" No, I answered, I wanted to write book of non-fiction, not make a dance. She hesitated and replied that I would be up against well-known historians and poets adding that 'the panel had never funded a dance book before'. Exactly why I want my proposal to stay with you, I answered. It did, and I was awarded a grant towards my research and writing. I have also been assisted through the NZ Society of Authors (PEN New Zealand) mentorship programme, whereby I have been paired with a writing mentor for a year. My mentor has been helpful in getting my writing up

to scratch and it is thanks to him that I am mid -way through the restructuring of the manuscript.

I would now like to share with you some of my research.

In January 1977, in a remote settlement on the East Coast of the North Island at Porangahau, a gathering of dancers, choreographers and teachers convened at the Rongomaraeroa Marae.<sup>1</sup> The hui, or gathering, was called together by organizer Gaylene Sciascia so that “the dance community could come together, share, talk, dream, create, maybe could put dance first and individual egos second ” (Sciascia interview, 2002). Events over these ten days changed the course of dance in New Zealand forever since it was here that the seeds were sown for the birth of Limbs Dance Company. As future members of the group met and danced together for the first time, it was clear that the combination of people, setting and circumstance established a new direction for dance in New Zealand.

From May 1977 until September 1989 Limbs formed the body and face of contemporary dance in Aotearoa. Limbs WAS dance in New Zealand. They danced in prisons, schools, shopping malls, rock festivals, universities, pubs, and theatres up and down the country. Over 160 choreographic works by twenty-seven different choreographers were produced within the studio walls of Limbs. More than 35 dancers literally gave their blood, sweat and tears to Limbs and produced memorable performances for thousands of people. Budding choreographers such as Mary Jane O'Reilly, Chris Jannides, Mark Baldwin, Douglas Wright, and Shona McCullagh were given carte-blanche to try out their ideas on the willing bodies of Limbs dancers. Making dances to the sounds of music from a diverse range of New Zealand artists, from the popular songs of bands Coconut Rough, Split Enz, Sichtung and the Topp Twins to the ‘serious’ compositions of Jack Body, Chris Cree Brown, Don

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<sup>1</sup> Maori meeting house and the land that it stands on.

McGlashan, Philip Dadson, Wayne Laird, Jan Preston and Ivan Zagni, audiences were able to hear local music in a new context.

Before Limbs, audiences had had glimpses of what dance could offer them through the performances of companies such as Impulse Dance Theatre in Wellington, started by Jamie Bull in 1975 and Susan Jordan's Movement Theatre in Auckland, 1976. Earlier dance pioneers Shona Dunlop MacTavish, Gisa Taglight, Boujke Van Zon, Rona Bailey, John Casserley and Gaylene Sciascia, had introduced modern dance to the New Zealand public. These pioneers showed New Zealanders that dance glorifies the physical and expresses the emotional, that dance communicates and demonstrates the remarkable potential of the human body, (the common denominator between performer and audience), that dance crosses over cultural and language barriers.

The three successive artistic directors of Limbs over the twelve-year period, Chris Jannides, Mary Jane O'Reilly and Cath Cardiff, took dance to the people. And the people came to them. Limbs could fill the Opera House in Wellington, the Great Hall in Christchurch, a field in the Coromandel, or the floor of their studio in Ponsonby. Audiences in Australia, Papua New Guinea, Japan, Hong Kong, Mexico and the United States were introduced to a Pacific form of contemporary dance.

I agree with the dance writer Marcia Siegel when she says, “dance reflects society” (Siegel 1991)). Limbs *did* reflect the New Zealand society of the 1980s; a time of growing up, becoming sophisticated and worldly-wise. Perhaps when watching Limbs, New Zealanders were able to glimpse a reflection, real or imagined of themselves, in the movement of the dancers.

The early dances of Limbs, c1977-78, were all made in reaction *to* something; other dance companies, music, theatre, literature or art works, national or international politics, feminism, the drug culture, the sexual revolution and sport. The first choreographers for Limbs, Chris Jannides, Mary Jane O'Reilly and Mark Baldwin,

were attempting to translate into dance their version of New Zealand society in the late 1970s. With a repressive National government in power and the country still reverberating from the recently ended Vietnam War, New Zealand was seemingly having its 1960s a decade later than the rest of the world. It was an extremely fertile era for performing arts in this country. Theatre and cross-performance groups such as Blerta, Debbie and the Dum Dums, Red Mole, From Scratch, Ratz Theatrix, The Plague, Theatre Corporate and rock and roll bands Split Enz, Toy Love and Citizen Band all emerged at this time.<sup>2</sup> Limbs soon became an integral part of that scene. Their dances, though at first short and relatively uncomplicated, relied on either the music (mostly 3-4 minute recorded popular songs) or the acting ability of the group to get the message across. The actual steps that the dancers executed were a mixture of jazz, ballet and modern dance heavily influenced by what the dancers were learning in their technique classes. None of these early choreographers had studied dance composition but instead had experimented with making dances on each other in their spare time. With little exposure to dance from elsewhere until their first tour to Australia in 1979, the Limbs choreographers had to rely on their own imagination and gut feelings to know whether a dance 'worked' or not. The critics soon told them. Under the headline **Messages in their limbs** John Ghent wrote in the *Auckland Star* March 17, 1978, p10:

The tight choreography of Chris Jannides and Mary Jane O'Reilly release passion, beauty and humour. Sometimes they touch themes of loneliness and misery expressed in recognisable postures and tensions of our society but transformed by the dance.

Two choreographers of Limbs at this time had read the philosophies of stage director and theorist Peter Brook. His belief, that space is a 'tool' struck a chord with Jannides and Baldwin. Brook asked "Is there a language of actions, a language of sounds-a

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<sup>2</sup> These groups employed hyper theatrized means in their acts. For instance, the Auckland-based band The Plague's songwriter and singer Richard Von Sturmer, a person of restricted growth, often performed nude with his body painted blue.

language of word-as-part-of-movement?" (Brook, 1968 p.55). These two young choreographers wanted to test Brook's theory of "rough theatre". That is, of theatre "that's not in a theatre".<sup>3</sup> So, they took their dances outdoors, to cabarets, to fashion shows, nightclubs, in the foyers of theaters, at car launches, student commons, schools, prisons, anywhere that they felt inclined to perform. These types of performances brought them to the attention of a huge cross section of the population. Because Limbs's repertoire at this time consisted of short, usually humorous works, they were able to present any number of pieces shaped to the spectators' or clients' requirements. This variety of gigs not only fed them and kept a studio roof over their heads but even more importantly it instilled in them the discipline needed to keep going. The group did everything required to put on a show; drive themselves to the venue, set up, sweep the floor, hang lights, set up a sound system, iron costumes, warm up, perform and at the end, pack up everything and drive home. Baldwin explains that "Mary Jane, Chris and I had such different ideas as to what Limbs was and the programmes, even though they were short little pieces; they had quite a variety to them. There was something raw about the early Limbs." (Baldwin interview, 2001).

Even though Marcia Siegel states that "Dance history is affected by the overwhelming and routine loss of the primary evidence on which history is built" (Siegel 1991, p. ix), Alexandra Carter, in her recent publication, *Rethinking Dance History*, argues otherwise. She states "Although a case has been made that dance poses a special challenge to the historian because of its ephemerality such a claim is only partially tenable, for all of the past is ephemeral; it exists only in records of the events, not in the events themselves" (Carter 2004 p 14). Carter argues that in creating dance histories we have an advantage in the type of source material available to us since "it is in the use of visual sources where dance study has the edge over many other disciplinary endeavors" (Carter 2004, p.16).

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.73

I did indeed utilise dance videos and films made of early Limbs works in order to see dances that I had only heard or read about. For instance, the video of Mary Jane O'Reilly first work for Limbs, the 1977 *Reptile*. A tight, well structured dance, with its portrayal of lizards creeping and hissing at each other, it gives ample opportunity for the dancers to show off their lithe, flexible bodies with splits, leg extensions and arched backs, not to mention animated faces. O'Reilly was aware that she was embarking on a new approach to choreography with this dance. For the first time she 'invented' the movement rather than putting jazz or ballet steps together.

Over the next few years the dances Limbs performed became longer, more complicated and artistically more challenging, some more successful than others. Once Jannides had left for Australia in 1980, O'Reilly became the sole artistic director until 1986 and the main choreographer. However, she encouraged company members to choreograph. Adrian Batchelor and Douglas Wright made works for the company which presented different views of New Zealand society. In the case of Wright, the first work he made for the company in 1981, *Backstreet Primary*, was a not too subtle attack on New Zealand's rugby culture. Later in the 80s Australian choreographers Graeme Watson, Garry Lester (who also danced with Limbs), Kai Tai Chan and adopted Australian Sue Healey made works for the company which, for want of a better word, could be called 'post modern'. American choreographers Ruby Shang and John McLaughlin introduced abstract, technically challenging works.

By 1988 Limbs had well and truly entered the world of Dance-Theatre when they presented Douglas Wright's evening-length (70 minute) work *Now is The Hour*. This work, filmed by TVNZ, marked a milestone in New Zealand dance and was a huge



departure for *Limbs*. The final section of the work, set to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, featured 12 naked (except for flesh-coloured g-strings) dancers. A *pieta* tableaux begins to emerge from the mass of bodies. There is a sense of desperation and despair among the group as they run, reach and fall. The dancers are totally exposed, physically and emotionally. This was not a light-hearted, entertaining work but delved into the area of dark dreams and existential angst. In the twelve years of its existence, *Limbs* had matured and developed to the point where a work such as this was possible.

Unfortunately this was a brief flowering period, for a little over a year after this work premiered, *Limbs* had folded.

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