

PACIFIC DANCE NZ

CHOREOGRAPHIC LAB IS 10 YEARS OLD

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By Aaron Taouma



In 2009 the inaugural Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab was presented at the Metro Theatre Mangere. It was part of the then Manukau Arts Festival and the star event of the Pacific Dance Fono. The function of the Choreographic Lab was to allow emerging NZ based Pacific dance choreographers to explore new ideas and 'kick start' new original works.

Four choreographers were selected that first year; Justin Haiu, Melissa Leaupepe, Carolanne Makakaufaki and the late Siaosi Mulipola; while Julia Mage'au Gray (Sunameke Dance Company) acted as Choreographic Lab mentor. The Choreographic Lab was funded by Creative New Zealand and supported by Dance Aotearoa NZ (DANZ).

The director of the event Iosefa Enari reflects; "We had run the dance Fono for a few years but wanted a practical component so it included actual dance. The choreographers were selected representing a range from young to old, from street dance to heritage and contemporary. They worked in South Auckland over a two-week period culminating in a showing at the Fono. Choreographers were provided with dance instructors which also included a very young Parris Goebel. This set the scene for the Choreographic Lab as a supportive environment to work through ideas and the showing not being a 'show' per se but a sharing of those ideas. It was all totally experimental and you never knew what you'd get."

2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab. Since those tentative first steps it has not only become an independent event from the Fono but has also spawned other programmes and most notably was the basis for the establishment of the Pacific Dance Festival (2013 onwards).

Enari again reflects; "What we found was the Lab had created a whole bunch of great original works, snippets of what our choreographers had to offer. We wanted to showcase not only the scope and variety of works produced but also the voices of a growing number of new, young, fresh and talented Pacific dance artists. All they needed was the space to create and share."

2013 and the Choreographic Lab was in its fourth year. There was a sizeable stable of talent from which to pull a "best-of-the-best" type showcase - billed as the Moana Pacific Dance Showcase. This event took several of the works from the previous years of the Lab and gave the selected choreographers the opportunity to rework and extend.

The result spoke for itself; sold out performances and an audience hungry for the particular mix of freshness, movement and culture the showcase offered. The Pacific Dance Festival took flight.

Enari expands; "The development from the Choreographic Lab to the showcase and then into the festival was a natural progression but we really did have to do the groundwork with the Lab. It was not only a conduit for the growing pool of talent but also it was a means to attract and educate our audience about what was going on in contemporary Pacific dance. And, they totally got it! Over the years they had returned and like us were building up their vocabulary of contemporary Pacific dance and the understanding that a choreographer is an independent artistic voice and not just a glorified dancer. It's been a great ride but one that is totally founded on the talent stemming from the Lab."

That talent reflects what has been a continually growing swell of emerging to mid-career practitioners very much reflecting the ballooning Pacific population centred in Auckland (where two-thirds of Pacific people live) and Wellington (where just over a tenth live). This also reflects the youthful age of the population (near half of Pacific people are under the age of 25).

Generally this has seen growth in Pacific representation and participation in dance from community dance classes to formal training institutes, graduate and post-graduate courses, and through to the emergence of totally new and varied dance companies. But, the progression from dance school to professional choreographer and or director of your own company needs a connector, somewhere to try things out and give things a first go. This is what the Choreographic Lab represents.



New Zealand Dance researcher and reviewer Raewyn Whyte has been a part of the Pacific Dance story since the beginning with website development and as a regular supporter and reviewer at the Choreographic Labs over the years.

She reflects on the significance of the Choreographic Lab; "The Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab is certainly a connector. More than that, it has contributed immensely to the changing face of the contemporary dance scene generally. It has been a catalyst in encouraging new Pacific graduates to push their own practice further and enrich the sector with their priorities and perspectives. They are making waves in the dance world."

Enari agrees; "The sector, like any other, needs bridges between the academic or training grounds and the real world of production and performance. But, especially within the arts, these bridges need to give flexibility and support allowing artists to find and steady themselves. We've tried several things to help fire-up that creative process, from providing appropriate dancers, master classes, technical instruction and mentors but in the end it is always a very individual and personal journey and the experience is not meant to be a be-all and end-all process. It's a step in the right direction."

Inspired by Pacific culture and propelled through the creative process of the Choreographic Lab the choreographers involved represent part of a new look dance sector that has re-negotiated the space (or "Va" as it is known in the Samoan language) to disrupt the status quo and redefine dance, as well as notions of Pacificity in a democratic New Zealand arts context. This context placed the cultural heritage of choreographers as an integral feature and placed them in a shifting paradigm of a myriad voices, styles, stories and slices of life.

Whyte continues; "The Lab has been pivotal to both creative development (the investigation, creation or presentation of professional arts practice and innovation) and industry development (by building capacity and strategically increasing viability and sustainability within the sector). Its importance as a feeder and development mechanism within the sector cannot be underestimated."

After ten-years the Choreographic Lab has helped a staggering 35 choreographers and spurred on the same number of created original works. Equate the average 7-10 minute work to total show time and you have a good 4 hours of performance with a wide cross-section of style dimensioning the scope of Pacific, contemporary, urban, youth culture informed by Western and Pacific dance theory and proficiency. The pool is eclectic and there is a certain energy around that eclecticism.

Justin Haiu was part of the first Choreographic Lab in 2009 where as a young dancer with a street dance background the type of expansion offered in the Choreographic Lab allowed him to translate the essence of his own personal journey of self discovery of his island homeland Uvea (Wallis) and Futuna. 'Call to Wallis' is the type of work epitomizing the Choreographic Lab principle of being a formation ground for not only the expression of experimental concepts but also the expression of intimate real life stories.

Haiu explains "The Choreographic Lab gave me the space to bring to life a story I had held inside for a long time. It was in a way a turning point and that's what I think it has offered a lot of the choreographers who have been through - a place to tell our own stories our way."



In 2020 the reworking of 'Call to Wallis' will be realised as a full-length show at the Pacific Dance Festival. This represents nicely the direct progression from development to materialisation in full-rendering, as does the development pathway of another full-work; 'Shel We' by Tupua Tigafua (Samoa, 2012 alumni), which in 2019 is touring.

Tigafua wholly credits the Choreographic Lab for setting the seeds of growth; "It was at the Lab where I was finally able to lay-out and structure key moments of Shel We that I really needed to see on the floor and played out. It was invaluable as a first real step towards full production."



Highlighting the female essence was central to 'Aua' by Charlene Tedrow, the Creative Director of Ura Tabu Pacific Dance (Samoa, 2011 alumni). 'Aua' (Samoan for 'don't') was for Tedrow (under the mentorship of Nina Nawalowalo of The Conch) a way of breaking cultural boundaries (tabu) and consciously deciding to explore a deeper sense of the female psyche through a Samoan world view.

"Linking the darkest part of ourselves with our own Aitu (spiritual guides) thus granting us permission to lift certain taboos that are limiting". This work evolved into 'Spiritus Aitu', which was part of the Moana showcase and began, for Tedrow, a process of subverting the dominant gaze of tourist orientated professional Pacific dance and moving into the world of representational and abstract presentation and provocations which she and her dance company have continued to evolve. She chronicles her Choreographic Lab experience as pivotal to that process.

Tedrow continues "Each year the bravery and artistry gets stronger and stronger and I am in so much gratitude for what this platform is offering to our arts ecology in Aotearoa. I continue to follow and support all upcoming brave choreographers that come through the Lab. It's very exciting! Furthermore, the experience reaffirmed my choreographic ambitions and gave me the much needed confidence to push boundaries as the space is held strongly by some great leaders in our Creative Arts sector. It to me was a place of so many things coming together, a place of consolidation."

Consolidation is also a word, which could be used to describe the experience of 2018 Choreographic Lab member Vivian Hosking-Aue (Cook Islands, 2018 Alumni) and his work 'Melville Place', a work he describes as an art autobiography about family secrets, myths and legends. More than consolidation the Choreographic Lab gave momentum to his newly formed company AUĒ Dance as he at the time was working through a number of consecutive works founding the company's place and himself as a serious contender in the Aotearoa dance sector.

Aue explains "I was not only able to consolidate but also take my academic practice to the floor. ChoreoLab was a platform for AUĒ Dance to share our Pasifika thoughts through movement as a safe creation space for Pasifika dance practitioners to be experimental and to just give it a crazy go."

Taking things from an academic view and placing them in a stage context was also the foundation of PHD dance lecturer Ojeya Cruz Banks' (Guåhan/Chamoru, 2011 Alumni) solo work 'Espritu Tasi'; exploring ecological metaphors and shared narratives of (Chamoru) identity in a climate change world.

Banks explains "The lab functioned as a creative think tank for me to dig deep into my Chamoru (Guåhan) whakapapa. It gave me a chance to reflect, draw & perform insights of my indigenous-diaspora treasure box of aesthetics & somatic praxis [body in practice]. The experience enabled a stronger bond to Tasi/Moana/Ocean that reinvigorated my identity."



Identity is also central to the work of 2014 choreographer Leki Bourke (Tonga/Niue, 2014 Alumni) who explored what it means to have Niuean identity by mixing a suite of Niuean, Samoan and Tongan dance styles relating Niue's historical foundations and development as a distinct culture through to what it means to be Niuean today. His work was called 'Plastic Savage'.

Bourke explains "The Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab was one of the best experiences for me as an emerging artist in the earlier stages of my career. Contemporary Niue dance pieces are few and far between and the choreo lab gave me the opportunity to find my voice and helped me acknowledge the importance of utilising culture in my work. Today I work as a multi-disciplinary artist but I have been able to transfer skills learnt through the choreographic lab into other areas and disciplines of work."

Identity and the classic New Zealand tendency to put down anyone who dares pop their head above everyone else was tackled in Hadleigh Pouesi's (Samoan/Maori, 2015 Alumni) piece 'Tall Poppy'. Pouesi, from a street dance background and director of 'Freshman's Dance Crew', saw the Lab as an opportunity to use the dance he knew best in a totally different expressive way; making art instead of just busting a groove

Pouesi explains "I wanted to use street dance forms to tell stories and express ideas over and above just presenting cool looking on the beat movements. The Lab affirmed my creative direction and supported me as I found my own creative flavour. It offered a chance not only to create but also to network and that has helped to develop shows and partnerships that solidified my place in the arts sphere."

The Pacific Dance Choreographic Lab in 2019 not only marks ten-years of development of the Lab but also celebrates ten-years of transformation and growth within the sector. It is now firmly entrenched as a staple in Pacific dance and arts sector calendars. It speaks to a future brimming with possibilities. It has been a connector, a linchpin in a time of ground swells linking training and the outright professional, individual and ensemble networks, choreographer and audience; through provision of a non-pressurised format emphasising freedom of expression and concept development. Presented in a cumulative showing of works each year the Choreographic Lab has become a community event in which friends, family, dance colleagues and pundits can share in dance journeys deep and inspiring.

As Enari has elucidated it has been and continues to be a "step in the right direction".



THE PACIFIC DANCE CHOREOGRAPHIC LAB ALUMNI ARE:

2009 - Justin Haiu, Carolanne Makakaufaki, Melissa Leaupepe, The Late Siasosi Mulipola

2010 - John Purcell Puleitu, Charlene Tedrow, Aruna Po-Ching

2011 - Tepaeru-Ariki Lulu French, Sesilia Pusiaki Tatuila, Ojeya Cruz Banks

2012 - Tupua Tigafua, Nita Latu, Maile Giffin

2013 - Santana Schmidt, Amo Ieriko, Nikki Upoko

2014 - Leki Bourke, Seidah Karati, Katerina Fatupaito

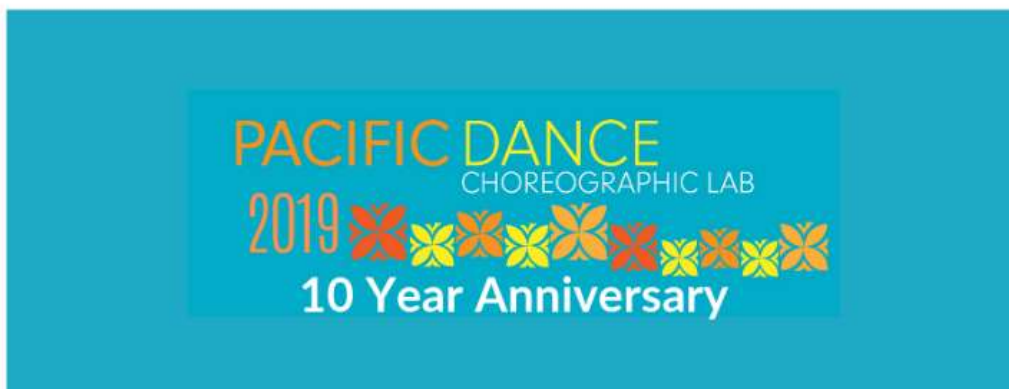
2015 - Hadleigh Pouesi, Jahra 'Rager' Wasasala, Albert 'Bux' Fale


2016 - Joash Fahitua, Filoi Vaila'au, Selina Alefosio

2017 - Jasmine Leota, Zildjian Robinson, Ufitia (Tia) Sagapolutele

2018 - Vivian Aue, Andy Tilo, Tofifailauga Misa,

2019 - Tupe Lualua, Villa Junior Lemanu, Raisedinland Iose, Connor 'Ooshcon' Masseurs



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