

So You Think You Can Dance – Australia: Allegiance and Provocation

By: Dr Garry Lester

I am surprised that there has been very little consideration of the reality TV phenomenon “So You think You Can Dance – Australia” (SYTYCD-A) from the dance community. I am an avid fan and I believe it has done more than any other intervention to lift the profile of dance in this country:

AUSTRALIAN dancers have waited a long time for their own reality TV show. Singers and models have lined up year after year for a shot at instant fame, celebrities and sportspeople have tried to dance, restaurateurs, home renovators, even complete and utter nobodies with no particular skills or talent have been embraced by the reality phenomenon. But dancers, as usual, have been relegated to the background of the light entertainment landscape.

Dancers are used to taking a back seat to other performers in video clips, at the Australian Idol final, at the Logies. Wherever colour and movement is needed to offset the main action, dancers fill the space. But not any more. Dancers are front and centre of Ten's breakout hit, So You Think You Can Dance Australia.¹

While I have stated my enthusiasm for the program I am not without criticism of various aspects of the show and the conversational responses of some of my peers. I hope this paper acts as enough of a provocation to stimulate critical debate in the public domain from the dance community.

In the early audition stages of the show it topped the ratings in its time-slot and while those figures (around the 2 million mark) dropped midway through the season, there was a resurgence of interest at a national level as the finale approached. It never dropped from the Top 20 free to air programs at any point during the course of its run.²

It's future is guaranteed and I for one embrace its popularity. Yet there has been disquiet from some members of the dance industry. The most public comment came from Meryl Tankard who was quoted in the Daily Telegraph³ as thinking it was 'hideous' and a 'fast food version of dance', but confessed that she watched the show. Whether or not she was quoted accurately is open to debate but the reported comments opened a flood of responses in blogs and forums around the country defending the program and often denigrating her practice. Interestingly, Doug Anderson in conversation with fellow TV critic Michael Idato⁴ suggested that Tankard was not so much expressing a dislike of the show as a sense of frustration that the general population does not support the wealth of live performance and dance films produced in this country.

While Michael Idato didn't enter the debate regarding art dance and popular culture (and that is most certainly what the fuss is about), he did comment that in terms of other "reality" programs SYTYCD is:

...not as artificial, cruel or deconstructive as an Australian Idol. It wasn't mean.⁵

These young men and women try to embrace every challenge they are given and work their butts off to entertain their audience.

What I have found disconcerting in the whole SYTYCD phenomenon is the sense of hierarchy in the dance world. While in other areas of the arts there is an appreciation of the range of expression within the form, it seems that resentment still abounds in the dance world. The boundaries and border surveillance are still in place between what is perceived as the high art/popular culture divide. The sad thing about this is that it appears to be coming from the art dance fraternity. The jobbing dancers who earn their living in the commercial theatre, at corporate gigs, in film and TV and at community functions don't see the divide, they are just as likely to attend a contemporary art dance performance as a musical theatre work.

This class-consciousness has been a feature of dance in Australia for over 100 years. Academic Lynn Fisher alerts us to the great divide between 'serious dance' and 'popular culture' in her MA thesis, which looks at professional dance and dance training in Western Australia in the early twentieth century. The rise of the English dance academies, championing Ballet and Revived Greek Dancing, was a conscious attempt to make dance a 'respectable' activity for middle class girls, and marginalize the Fancy Dancing (or entertainment) of the working class girls. While the research focuses on WA its conclusions have national relevance. Fisher states:

In Western Australia this respectable English dance was pioneered by Linley Wilson. She was supported by a vast network of community groups and public institutions. By 1929, the English dance was considered the appropriate vehicle for shaping middle-class girls into modern, but also traditional women. The dance was modern in that it made girls physically fit and their achievement was rewarded with certificates. It was traditional in that it made them graceful, compliant to a set syllabus, and did not expose their crotches. This dance was called art.

Western Australian working-class girls viewed dancing as entertainment and fun. They did not learn ballet, but tap and acrobatics: they did not want certificates but jobs on stage. These girls had to contend with the nineteenth-century image of 'the dancer as whore', and they modified it to fit within the bounds of respectability.⁶

If we consider class as not so much a condition of material circumstance but as an attitude of mind we can see the same hierarchical thinking at work in the contemporary dance field in its relationship to entertainment and popular culture.

While I have found much excitement and good will from many people in the dance community I have had contemporary dance practitioners tell me the show is crap and they would never watch such a thing. This is not to suggest that all contemporary dance practitioners share this view but I have been surprised at the number of people who espouse this view. When I push the point and ask them what is 'crap' about it the response falls into three broad categories: (1) the contestants are not good dancers, (2) it's simple entertainment and spectacle, (3) it's a competition.

In terms of the first category what I think is at stake here is a mistaken belief that their own technical training and movement philosophy is the sum total of field. It's the dance equivalent of the literary trope 'synecdoche' in which a part of something is used to represent the whole. It comes from a world-view that is so self referential that anything outside their experience and belief system is deemed of lesser value or even worthless. The SYTYCD performers have trained just as hard in their own stylistic regimen and with equal passion and commitment as any contemporary dance practitioner. The voting population recognized that rigour and committed to the journey.

My response to the final two categories is agreement. It IS about entertainment and spectacle, and I, like many others respond to the fact that I am part of the performance contract. I've been to too many art dance performances where the meaning of the work has remained trapped behind the fourth wall and I feel that the performers are involved in a private ritual, whose significance is known only to the initiated, and to which I haven't been invited. At least with SYTYCD if a performance does not appeal to me I know it will be over in 90 seconds. This may seem glib, but there have been performances that have missed the mark, and I shall talk about that later, but equally there have been works of considerable power. It takes considerable skill to engage an audience and sustain its interest even for a minute and a half.

Lastly, the criticism that the show is a competition is 'a no brainer'! Indeed it is. But the fascinating thing about this is that those contemporary dance practitioners who denigrate it for the 'goal of outperforming others or winning something' is exactly what the contemporary dance field is based on. Contemporary dance is a subsidized art form and every time a group of practitioners try to get a project up and running they are involved in competition for scarce resources: the caliber and history of the personnel is scrutinized by a panel of their peers. It may happen behind closed doors but let us not pretend it is anything other than a competition.

I have stated that I am a fan of the show and I look forward to seeing the next

series but I do have to say that there are a number of issues I think the producers need to address. I can live with the fact that for a show that is called a dance show there is in reality very little dance in it. I understand the commercial imperative resulting in the plethora of ad breaks and it was interesting to see the number of dancers who had been eliminated from the series spruiking various products – there has already been a spin-off for their careers. I also understand the overarching narrative device of creating a ‘back-story’ for each of our contestants that gives us a sense of early hardship and triumph over personal adversity:

With all this incredible talent on display, it seems a shame to devote so much air-time to the dancers' personal lives, their struggles and heartbreak, their triumphs over adversity. Much is made of the fact that Joel De Carteret ("JD") was abandoned by his parents in Manila when he was four, then adopted by a Melbourne family; of Demi Sorono's Filipino background and deaf sister; of the death of Aboriginal dancer Sermsah Bin Saad's mother; of Kate Wormald's lifesaving spinal operation when she was a baby; of Kassie Lee's recovery from a tumour in her leg; of Rhiannon Villareal's poor suburban background. In video "packages" played before their performances, they are shown at home with their tearfully proud families.⁷

As the season progressed, the ‘back-story’ was replaced by documentation of the day-to-day struggle to remain in the competition. So the series tries to create a balancing act between the drama of the contestants' early life and present challenges, and the moment of performance. It seems to me that one of the areas in which we might really learn something about how the dancers adapt to the changing circumstances of the competition and process the new information required to perform a style of dance they are not familiar with is sadly missing.

Unfortunately what happens in the rehearsal room remains ‘secret corrie business’. We have little idea how the choreographers work, or what the dynamic between the creator(s) and the dancers is. Perhaps it is simply a case of the dancers learning and replicating existing sequences of movement given the brevity of the rehearsal period. One of the many admirable traits of dancers working in the commercial theatre is their ability to learn fast in a situation that demands a quick turn around time.

Yet there were certain performances that gave the impression that something beyond “I teach and you learn” had happened in the creative process. The only glimpse we ever got behind those closed doors was a brief package that showed a moment of failure - a challenge to be overcome - where the performers were shown having difficulty with a lift, or a series of moves. It may be good on a dramatic level but it is a missed opportunity in terms of understanding anything about the creative process.

The point I am alluding to is one of education. Now there would be no need to consider the idea of educating the viewing public - none of the other reality TV

programs see it as part of their remit - except that one of our judges, Jason Coleman, keeps making the point that he is educating us. And that is unfortunate.

To put it simply Jason: Don't!

I know there are many viewers and a number of contestants who value Jason's feedback but I would like to suggest that a lot of that regard is given by default. Quite simply Bonnie and Matt have very little of value to say about the performances.

Matt Lee is a young man of few words and apparently less critical ability. Gems from his commentary include these helpful admonishments:

"That was a bit under!" - Under what Matt?
"It didn't do it for me!" - What didn't it do Matt?

And here is Matt at his most ebullient and incisive, referring to Kate's performances throughout the series:

"You bring it. You serve it. You nail it."

Bonnie Lythgoe

Where is the feisty young East Ender, played by Bonita Shawe as she was then known, in the 1967 classic movie *To Sir With Love*? Forty-one years later we have, as that acerbic TV critic Ruth Ritchie wrote about the finale of the show:

The repellently mealy-mouthed Bonnie Lythgoe (who) thanked us misguidedly for welcoming her into our homes.⁸

Ms Ritchie went on to suggest what Jack and Rhys might really be thinking as 'Our Nat', the host continued her:

Endlessly imploring HOW DO YOU FEEL? They couldn't say "How do you think I feel, sister? I'm a dancer, in Australia. Career high, to date, Nikki Webster clip. Chance of winning \$200,000 over entire career - very slim. I may have to spend the next 20 years touring with Cats just to eat. HOW DO I FEEL?"⁹

While on the last night Ms Bassingthwaite seemed intent on gaining a phenomenological perspective from our two finalists I was reminded that throughout the series it was Bonnie who seemed less concerned with giving critical feedback about performances than with asking the dancers "How do you

feel?” or “How do you think you went?”

Note to Bonnie: It’s a competition! And you, Matt and Jason are the judges, at least until we got down to the final ten and the voting system changed. Did she really think they might say (in the words of Matt) “It was a bit under”, or “I totally disagree with Matt and Jason’s assessment of my performance”, or “The ‘corrie’ sux but I did the best I could with what I was given”.

It seems to me the question is a non sequitur within the formal logic of the rules of a competition. The dancers are framed in a context where they have no power or ability to respond with candor or display any intelligence. I longed for the moment where someone reflected upon the age-old issue of the relationship between the performance of the material and the material itself: that would be the ‘corrie’ as our judges insisted on calling it:

Well Bonnie, during the process of creating the work I was reminded of those famous lines from a W B Yeats poem whose final stanza is:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

There is no distinction or problematic when everything comes together as one seamless whole in the moment of performance but once again I was given a series of steps that have little internal logic or flow; a mish-mash of competing movement styles: a tenuous storyline line that had more twists and turns than the plot of Tolstoy’s War and Peace; an alleged choreographer (that’s the person who creates the ‘corrie’) demanding that I manifest emotional states that have nothing to do with what I have been given; and all of this in the space of 90 seconds. If I survive tonight I hope and pray that I am lucky enough to work with Jason Gilkison next week. Oh, and that’s Gilkison without an “n” in the middle, judges.¹⁰

Jason Gilkison was lauded –and rightly so - for the quality of his choreography and indeed during the finale, when they reprised the best ‘corrie’ of the season, his works constituted more than half of those presented. Unfortunately, right from the beginning of the series, when any of the judges publicly praised him and called him a ‘living legend’ they referred to him as Jason Gilkinson. Our Nat never had that problem - but then she had the advantage of reading from an autocue.

But to return to the judges: Jason at least seemed to have witnessed the performance with some critical faculty and attempted to give feedback to help the dancers develop their performance qualities. With his low register and voice of authority he certainly presented as the gob for the job. Unfortunately when

Jason assumed the mantle of the educator it all went pear shaped. Here are but two of the many examples:

Jason commenting on a performer's *ballon*: "That's French for jump'. Well, no Jason, *ballon* is related to the act of jumping but what the term refers to is a sustained quality of movement:

...by which the impression is given that the dancer, by a reversal of the laws of gravity, is continuously thrown off the ground, instead of pushing away from it, and should not be confused with "elevation" which is more concerned with the height of the dancer's jumps.¹¹

It is the ability to sustain the flow of a series of elevated steps with apparent ease.

Our Jason was constantly amazed by B-girl Demi's ability to rise to the challenge of every new style she was given. I lost count of the number of times he told us Demi had no technical training. I kept on asking myself what he thought it was that was sustaining her ability to perform. Was it a connection with some metaphysical realm, perhaps a direct line to the muse Terpsichore, daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, patron of choral songs and dancing?

But Jason, ever the educator, finally revealed what he meant by lack of technique:

Technique is something you get from ballet training. And you've never done a ballet class have you Demi?!

Well now that Jason cleared that up we can all move on and all those dancers who dedicate themselves to alternative methods of training like ballroom and modern dance and a host of other styles can continue to dance, secure in the knowledge that they have no technique.

Let's just hope that none of our dancers think for themselves, or heaven forbid, reflect upon our dance history and recognise the ongoing claim to hegemony of classical ballet in the field of western dance. I am reminded of Gertrud Bodenwieser's observation regarding Isadora Duncan¹²:

Advocates of classical ballet have accused her of lacking technique, whilst what they actually meant was that she did not follow the technique which they themselves used and preferred.

Jason caused considerable consternation and a plethora of irate comments from bloggers and contributors to the SYTYCD forum for his determination to describe the dancers' moves in ballet terms, regardless of the style of presentation in performance. He was nothing if not consistent in his belief that the steps

themselves and the qualities of movement could always be reduced to the vocabulary of ballet.

Note to the judges, and as a consequence of their nomenclature, to the dancers themselves: If each of the different forms of dance is a genre, what term do we then use to classify this body of work that represents commercial entertainment performance? Perhaps if we talk about 'styles' of dance within the 'genre' of commercial entertainment it might be more helpful.

The judges (if they are to remain for the next series) would do better to review their commentary over the first series and seek guidance about how to give constructive and helpful feedback. Tell the viewing public and the performers what informs your approbation or disapproval: "You nailed it," or "It didn't do it for me," isn't helpful to anyone.

Before I focus on what is to me the most problematic area of the series let me simply state two concerns I hold. The first relates to the breadth of expertise of the judging panel and the second is a plea for the recognition of a uniquely Australian voice in the works presented. Given the number of ballroom dances that were presented during the season it would serve everyone well to have someone on the panel who can critique those dances from an informed position. In terms of the second concern: Where are the contemporary indigenous choreographers?

The most pressing apprehension that needs to be addressed before the next season is a nexus of issues to do with the politics of representation. Our judges need to be held to account for the comments they make that reinforce the infantilizing of performers, overt racism, and the perpetuation of sexual and gender stereotypes.

Throughout the series these young men and women were never referred to as such. The men were always "boys" and the women were referred to as "girls" or "ladies". It is as if they were held in a state of suspended animation, never allowed to grow into adulthood. The "girls" were sometimes transformed into "ladies" an appellation redolent with the supposed virtues of the feminine rather than the positive attributes of the feminist. The "boys", on a few occasions were deemed "fella," which made them seem like an affectionate animal companion. Somehow, dancers are never allowed to grow up and claim the subjectivity of an adult. Time and time again in ballet classes in particular I have seen the participants called boys and girls and never referred to as men and women. If the import of what I am saying hasn't touched you yet, imagine that until the end of her esteemed dancing career in her mid sixties Dame Margot Fonteyn was deemed a "girl" in company class.

I was astounded while watching the auditions to witness Matt Lee's response to

the performance of one of the contestants. His response is still fresh in my mind but I will leave the commentary to a blogger:

Next was Alberto who was just pure Sydney. This Bali born dancer wore stiletto knee high fuck me boots tucked into his jeans, and then just started gyrating. It was hilarious, and at least he danced in time. But Matt Lee summed it up perfectly when he said " I was waiting for the ping pongs to start flying."¹³

Not only did Matt Lee make the offensive comment, we also have a fan of the show repeating the slur and agreeing with its sentiment!

My final point concerns the construction of identity, notions of gender and sexuality. It is an issue that deserves a paper in itself. Let me commence by stating that it should have been mandatory for the judges to read *The Best Little Knitter in the West* before embarking on the project. It's a charming children's book written by one of the contestants Sermsah Bin Saad in which the central character, George, challenges gender stereotypes by deciding to make a career out of knitting, opening a shop and selling his wonderfully imaginative creations.¹⁴

Maybe the knowledge that one of the dancers had written a book might have opened them up to the possibility that they were dealing with complex human beings who think about their own place in the world, the possibilities we have to construct our individual identities, and our relationships to the wider society. Instead we saw the reinforcement of gender and sexual stereotypes that seem at odds with wider community opinion. One contestant in particular became the focus for the judges' perverse notions of what a man should be.

For the first half of the series Rhys Bobridge was constantly critiqued in terms of his questionable ability to project masculinity and yet week after week he smiled knowingly and took the criticism in his stride. It was a delight to behold. Rhys was comfortable in who he is and knew more than the judges that gender and sexuality are fluid: that we construct our own identity. He threw these stereotypes back at them in his performances and still maintained a quiet dignity, resplendent in his glorious drag-queen make-up and 'unique ability to accessorise' – a claim to fame that Barbie must now share with Rhys Bobridge - as those misguided custodians of identity waxed lyrical at his ability to be a "man".

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ENDNOTES

¹ Bridget McManus, *The Age*, 21st February 2008

² OzTam is the official source of television ratings. The title is an acronym for Australian Television Audience Management: www.oztam.com.au

³ "Meryl Tankard slams SYTYCD as hideous", The Daily Telegraph, 18th March 2008, article by Katherine Field

⁴ Video commentary www.media.smh.com.au, go to 27th April 2008

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Fisher, L. Dance Class: A history of professional dance and dance training in Western Australia from 1895 to 1940, MA thesis, Department of History, University of Western Australia, 1992. The quotation is taken from Fisher's Abstract pp VI-VII.

⁷ Bridget McManus, The Age, 21st February 2008

⁸ Ruth Ritchie, Arts and Entertainment, The Sydney Morning Herald, May 3-4, 2008, p 10.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ It was at this point the present author went into his own flight of fancy. The quotation comes from the poem - Among School Children - by WB Yeats.

¹¹ Kersley, L. & Sinclair, J. A Dictionary of Ballet Terms, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1952, p 19.

¹² Bodenwieser, G. The New Dance, Vacluse, Sydney, published by Marie Cuckson, printed by Rondo Studios, 1970, p 43.

¹³ A post on 6th February 2008 by Reality Raver:
www.realityravings.blogspot.com

¹⁴ Sermsah Bin Saad, The Best Little Knitter in the West, Broome WA, Magabala Books, 2000 (illustrations by Samantha Cook)