Book Review – Tirairaka: Dance Education in New Zealand Schools by Jan Bolwell

Jan Bolwell’s *Tirairaka: Dance Education in New Zealand Schools* provides readers with a tasteful, succinct and easy to digest account of the undulations of dance education throughout New Zealand, 1900 – 2008. This crisp account coagulates information about the snowballing effect of individual educators, syllabi and institutions which have influenced the position that dance has in schools today. As a result, dance in New Zealand is a compulsory part of the primary syllabus, a stand-alone NCEA subject and an approved university entrance subject.

Bolwell’s account also links the underpinnings of New Zealand dance education to the influences of people and syllabi overseas, namely in the UK and America. It is in this process of web making that Bolwell presents a snippet of dance history in Aotearoa, New Zealand that is intricate, should we care to examine the detail.

Starting with descriptions of dance masked as physical education and military drill, *Tirairaka* travels the length of New Zealand from 1900 and finds that dance education has had a patchwork of presence and purpose in the national education system. Shifting from a focus on health and wellbeing, to dance as an art form, with the inclusion of Maori performing arts and the touch of American modern dance, the text presents history in bite-sized canapés. It is logical that both the slender size of the book and number of years Bolwell chooses to document restricts the size of morsel.

Amidst the recount of connecting influences, Bolwell does not forget to highlight the influence of the first Labour government in 1935 and authorities such as Clarence Beeby and Philip Ashton Smithells. Any historical account of dance education in New Zealand that bypasses such names and their actions, which pried open floodgates for dance in schools, might be considered blind. However, Bolwell’s sight proves spacious, as she also includes text on the puppet strings of the English physical education syllabus for education in New Zealand and, furthermore, on Margaret Dunbar’s work in establishing biculturalism in dance education.

The capsule book, 22 pages long, is sectioned into manageable paragraphs for each new topic or person introduced. While this style might be alluring to wandering or young minds, it curtails desire possibilities for something to chew-over. The short and sweet flavour of *Tirairaka* is further emphasised by Bolwell’s writing style, which in this publication is non frivolous in word choice. The simplicity of the text is a notable feature of this book and highlights its accessibility and value for students within current dance education in New Zealand and beyond.

*Tirairaka*, is, however, not without its embellishments. Throughout the book, Editor Rachel McAlpine and Bolwell use striking black and white images generously to illustrate
the changing status of dance in New Zealand schools. The images, many of which are sourced from the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, are vivid and printed with an appealing quality. Always advantageous in a book about dance, these images help to draw readers into the world of the text and to retain interest. Bolwell and McAlpine have achieved a fine balance between portraits of individual people for the purpose of identification and of dance groups in action.

Between the lines of *Tirairaka*, it is challenging to pick the tone of Bolwell’s voice. The protocol of recounting facts, seemingly tied up with historical writing, appears to have dulled the audibility. Despite quotes in bold italics, which are helpful in distinguishing the voice of others from the author’s, the text is frequently a monologue in the sense that it lacks the tossing of critical dialogue.

Disappointment with the final section of this book remains. The account of dance education between 2000 and 2008 was sparse and Bolwell concludes with a ‘happily ever after’ ending which does not satisfy. Unexpectedly, Bolwell did not return to an earlier passing comment about flack “for spending too much time on the ‘frills’ as opposed to the ‘3 R’s,’ a song still sung today” (p.9). Perhaps this ‘song’ resounds, over and above the fairytale ending, with the reality of current dance education. In the immediate moment, New Zealand arts educators might be encouraged by the great distance that dance has travelled to become established in schools and by the bulging sense of hope for a harmonious future that Bolwell presents in *Tirairaka*.

Not to worry, Bolwell has collated evidence depicting a rich history of change and development in New Zealand dance education. This addition to New Zealand literature will inevitably expand existing dialogue around the arts, by contributing to the cultivation of contextual understanding in which other dance writers, academics, students, educators and enthusiasts can position themselves.

I look forward to a sequel from Bolwell, in which New Zealand voices, less known with personal histories existing beneath this historical account, are expressed with rawness and resonance.

**Biography**

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Juanita Jelleyman

Juanita Jelleyman is currently doing her Masters in Creative and Performing Arts at The University of Auckland. Her research is a combination of choreography, performance and writing. Having completed her Undergraduate and Postgraduate qualifications in Dance Studies, including papers in dance education and dance in Aotearoa, amongst others, Juanita enjoys the combination of dance making and research. Juanita has been choreographing for a University dance tour team travelling to Beijing this year and she lectures part time in the Dance Studies department.