

LOWDOWN



COME OUT 93

Reviewed

Focus on : Dance (continued)

**"There are 400 youth dance companies in the UK,"
said Dr Peter Brinson in one session at the
Green Mill Dance Project.**

**Jane Westbrook, Director of the Performing Arts Board
of the Australia Council, who is very familiar with
the UK scene, commented to me later that she was
surprised how little support such companies received here,
whereas youth drama and music groups
appeared to be flourishing.**



Melissa Cox in Steps' *Break Time To Bare The Soul*, 1991 season:
Hayman Theatre, Curtin University. *Choreography: James Berlyn.*

Youth Ballet - **Youth** **Dance** *Part One*

What's Up Down Under?

by **Hilary Trotter**

I have just heard from Lorna Hempstead, chair of the PAB's dance committee, that an in-depth examination of the whole youth dance area, including dance in education, is about to be commissioned.

Thinking about the UK's 400 companies in relation to the situation here raised all sorts of questions in my mind, starting with what IS a youth dance company? What DO we have here in Australia?

During my years with AADE (now Ausdance) my involvement with building its data base made me aware of the wide and varied range of activities which could be brought under the heading of youth dance (e.g., youth ballets, youth dance companies, tertiary

course groups, training companies, youth dance/theatre groups, recreational dance groups based on pop or folk styles).

There is a sense in which ALL dance performance groups in Australia can be called youth dance companies. The average age for retirement for professional dancers in this country is between 25 and 30, while *"The age of entry into the profession for classical dancers is from as early as sixteen years up to the age of about twenty years"* (**Dancers' Transition Report, Beall 1989**). I am obviously not going to be talking about professional dance in these articles, but it is as well to be aware that youth dance is not directly comparable with youth theatre or music in terms of age groups.

The organisations I have in mind cater for amateur dancers aged from about eight to about eighteen

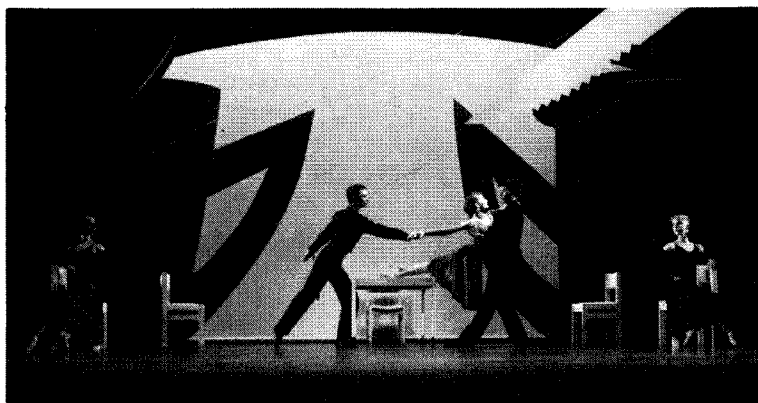
years old, some of whom will be aiming at professional employment. This enquiry for *Lowdown* was originally intended to focus on youth ballets, but I will also talk about youth dance companies using other styles. I will also briefly cover the pre-professional training area, before mentioning some of the issues relating to the youth dance field. In the next article I will discuss these issues and cover in more depth some of the groups I have encountered.

my impression that youth dance companies have fewer problems in this respect. What is the difference between the two?

For the purposes of these articles I will define *Youth Ballet* to mean companies which draw their main complement from selected serious dance students, giving defined seasons of performances (ie, more ambitious than the single end-of-year school concert) and performing mainly in classical or neo-classical choreography. The

of the kind of technical and artistic demands which will be made of them. Accompanying this practical approach is a desire to counter a perceived former emphasis on starkly-disciplined classical technique by instilling an appreciation of the art form which will last children all their lives.

Youth Dance Companies, on the other hand, generally work in contemporary styles and draw their (mainly teenage, although junior groups are often formed) performers from much more diverse sources. The movement skills demonstrated at auditions may have been acquired through private dance school training, but equally as well through high school sport or dance, social or recreational dance activities outside school. In this kind of group it is the process of familiarisation with high standard performance practice which is important. The aim is educational rather than vocational, although quite a number of participants do go on to professional careers in the arts - not necessarily in dance and not necessarily in performance. Indeed, there appears to be a strong desire on the part of ALL directors to emphasise encounters with all aspects of the theatrical experience, based on a growing perception of the breadth of career opportunities in the performing arts.



(Left to right): Shona Erskine, Eden Lee, Annabel Reid, Grayson Millwood and Rachel Whitworth in *The Host*, Playhouse, September, 1989. National Capitol Dancers. Choreographer: Natalie Weir.

YOUTH BALLET/YOUTH DANCE

Some years ago youth ballets seemed to be multiplying. The example of such groups as Inara Svalbe's Australian Youth Ballet, (founded in 1978 and based in Brisbane, but at present in recess) may have motivated others to put their own ideas into practice. I have seen some floundering because the successful youth orchestra concept (selecting and combining exceptional talent from numerous tutors) does not seem to translate well to the ballet environment. Indeed, some studios have seen it as a threat, not an honour, to have their best students offered roles which meant being brought under another teacher's direction and training - often depriving the original teacher of the top students' time for end-of-year concerts. It is

aims of this kind of company are generally to do with a desire on the Director's part to prepare students for pre-professional training and ultimately professional activity by making students thoroughly aware

STEPS YOUTH COMPANY

Director: Ruth Osborne
Location: Perth, WA
Structure: Fully incorporated
Ages: by open audition, Seniors 15-18
 Juniors 12-14
Styles: contemporary
Base: 3 professional companies

EXTENSIONS

Director: Jane Pirani
Location: Townsville, QLD
Structure: Within Dance North structure
Ages: by open audition, 13-c22
Styles: contemporary, some classical
Base: 1 professional company

NATIONAL CAPITOL DANCERS

Director: Janet Karin, OAM
Location: Canberra ACT
Structure: Incorporated
Ages: Selected c8-c18
Styles: contemporary
Base: 3 professional companies

AUSTRALIAN YOUTH BALLET

Director: Inara Svalbe, OBE
Location: Brisbane, QLD
Structure: Incorporated
Ages: by open audition, formerly 8-16 after recess, 2 new groups 10-15, 11-25
Styles: classical, neo-classical

I began by contacting Ausdance branches. Mark Gordon, Victorian executive officer, commented: "We have nothing in Victoria at the moment. Where is our youth dance culture? What I'm talking about is the art-form, performance work, not the night-club, warehouse party scene, which is booming." Victoria has unfortunately lost the model formerly provided by the St Martin's Youth Theatre dance group, and also more recently the Ensemble

".. the comon factor to all is the leadership of a Founder/Director with special abilites, passion and dedication. This is both a strength and a weakness..."

Dance Theatre owing to the passing of David Ross-Smith.

This State is well served, of course, with youth dance performances from students in pre-professional training, emanating from such institutions as the VCA and Victoria College (Rusden), and is the home of the Australian Ballet's junior group, The Dancers' Company. (While I do not propose to concentrate these articles on the tertiary area, it is worth noting that the Ausdance annual publication *Further Studies in Dance* lists 14 undergraduate and nine graduate dance courses all over Australia. All of these provide performance and occasional touring experience for their students and have just held (in 1992) their first tertiary dance festival, while the next is to take place in Perth in 1994.)

In a slightly different category are three secondary training institutions, the MacDonald College (NSW), the Queensland Dance School of Excellence (Qld) and the VCA junior section, all of which provide what might be termed pre-pre-professional training integrated with regular schooling. Some private ballet schools also offer full time courses designed for this purpose, having made individual arrangements with local education authorities and



Above and below: Australian Youth Ballet. Early pictures - no details given. Courtesy: Inara Svalbe



particular High Schools. Many training groups mount special performances at local events and travel to the Adelaide *Come Out* festival, as well as representing Australia in Aberdeen and at the Festival of Youth Dance formerly held at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts on an annual basis.

The unique and highly-regarded Aboriginal/Islander Skills Development Scheme gives both secondary and tertiary training in Sydney, with a carefully mapped series of opportunities for performance through its own performing group Aboriginal/Islander Dance Company, and strong links to the professional company, Bangarra.

Having links with a professional company, while not absolutely essential to a youth dance group, does appear to have several advantages, one of which is the clear demonstration to students of possible career paths and the commitment required to enter upon them. Another is a mutually advantageous system for encouraging new choreographers from within company ranks to try their hands at making new works for the

junior group. Yet a third is access for the junior group to professional teaching, technical and administrative advice, and the added stability - if such a quality exists in the performing arts - of an established organisation.

Apart from Victoria, Ausdance officers in all States and Territories offered examples of youth dance/youth ballet companies which are independent entities, not connected with training institutions but having been originally nurtured by some other organisation - most often a private studio, sometimes a professional company, sometimes a community group. The national office of Ausdance has also assisted considerably. (However my attempts at contacting individual groups have not always been successful, and it remains a matter for conjecture whether some of them still exist.)

While several different youth performing group models are discernible, the common factor to all is the leadership of a Founder/Director with special abilities, passion and dedication. This is both a strength and a weakness. While the same



Tammie Rennie (The Fool) and Karina Smith (The Mother) in Extensions' *The Travellers' Tales*, 1991.

observation can be made of professional (particularly experimental) groups - that the Director/Choreographer is the sustaining single influence - the youth dance group is liable to be more fragile and less able to withstand the loss of such an all-important person.

STRUCTURES

Most of the groups I encountered were legally established as separate entities, and broadly followed one or other of these formats:

1. Based on selected students from a single large ballet/dance school (*example*: National Capital Dancers, directed by Janet Karin and drawing on the National Capital Ballet School in Canberra);

2. Based on students selected by audition from a variety of ballet/dance schools (*example*: Australian Youth Ballet, directed by Inara Svalbe and located in Brisbane);

3. Based on participants in a Youth Theatre/Community Theatre organisation (*example*: the former St. Martin's Youth Theatre Dancers, directed by David McMicken, located in Melbourne);

4. Based on selected students from a variety of sources, either sustained by, or with strong connections to, a professional company or companies (*examples*: Extensions, directed by Jane Pirani, structurally associated with Dance North in Townsville, and Steps, directed by Ruth Osborne and supported by three widely differing professional companies in Perth - Two Dance Plus, Chrissie Parrot Dance Collective and West Australian Ballet);

5. Based on students at a tertiary institution. (As mentioned, I will not be focusing further on this category).

There have also been performing groups based on High School dance courses, notably the one run for many years by Robyn Callan at Campbelltown High School, Adelaide. Owing to the mobility of individual teachers (and students) within the education system, such groups probably have a limited lifespan. However the popular Rock Eisteddfodau and High School Dance Festivals annual event have had considerable effect on the numbers of teenagers participating in dance products of various kinds and styles, and it is reasonable to assume that performance groups may eventuate.

ISSUES

In my next article I will be discussing a number of issues important to the success of a youth dance project. These will include topics brought forward by some of the Directors with whom I have had discussions, for example:

Finding suitable choreography; accessing the best talent; discipline and commitment; structure; styles; obtaining support; dependence on the drive and flair of one person; finding performance venues. ●

HILARY TROTTER is a highly-skilled dance writer/editor. She has contributed to a wide cross-section of dance magazines including Australasian Dance, Dance Action, Dance Australia, Muse, Young Ballerina and Dance Forum, as well as being *Dance Critic* for the Canberra Times from 1972-1990. In 1984 she was the joint winner of the ADAMS award for contributions to dance in education. In 1990 she was both a recipient of the International Dance Day award for valuable contributions to the art of dance in Australia and awarded national Honorary Life Membership of AADE (now Ausdance) in recognition of her services.

ALICE SPRINGS BALLET COMPANY

Director: Lynne Hanton

Location: Alice Springs, NT

Structure: ?

Ages: selected 12-18

Styles: classical, neo-classical

Base: 3 dance schools, 1 drama school

BALLET D'ACTION

Director: Penelope Lancaster

Location: Sydney, NSW

Structure: Ltd Company

Ages: by open audition, 12-25

Styles: classical, contemporary, jazz, tap

Base: Independent

SA CHILDREN'S BALLET COMPANY

Director: Beverley Waters

Location: Adelaide, SA

Structure: Incorporated

Ages: by audition 10-18

Styles: classical, character, modern

Base: various ballet schools

DANCE SOUTH

Director: Lesley Grahame

Location: Hobart, Tasmania

Structure: ?

Ages: by audition, 16-26, plus some children

Styles: contemporary

Base: community

What are the issues
that face the person
in charge of
educating a young
person in dance
today?

The concluding
article in
HILARY TROTTER's
investigation into
pre-tertiary Youth
Ballet/Youth
Dance in
Australia.

Youth Ballet - Youth Dance

Part Two

What's Up Down Under?



CHOREOGRAPHY

Finding suitable pieces to perform is a pressing concern for directors of youth ballets in particular, many of whom have moved away from the early pressures of providing the steps themselves. There is a growing trend toward the commissioning of professional choreographers to produce work and a growing recognition among professionals that this is an arena in which dancers new to choreography can introduce themselves to the art and established choreographers can obtain a greater range of opportunities. For example, dancers employed in Perth's three professional companies work regularly with Ruth Osborne's company, Steps, while choreographers such as Chrissie Koltai, Robert Ray, Garth Welch and Natalie Weir have devoted considerable time to working with a number of youth companies.

Choreographing for youth pieces "does not mean ... mushrooms and fairies," says Inara Svalbe, Director of the Australian Youth Ballet. "There is so much that very young

Readers of my previous article will be aware that, while touching briefly on a broader range of youth dance activities, I am focusing this enquiry on pre-tertiary youth ballet/youth dance structured companies working in classical and contemporary styles. As I mentioned then, a number of issues face the directors of such companies.

Disorient Express (1992) Choreography: Jane Pirani. **Extensions, the Youth Link to Dance North.** Photo: Ned Kelly

dancers can do. She is planning to re-establish her group after a hiatus partly caused by overwork, saying, "next time it won't be choreographed by me, but I wish it wasn't so hard to find other choreographers who want to work with children."

Janet Karin (Director of the National Capital Dancers) recognises that in the professional environment it is difficult to take

substantial risks on experimental material. For her youth company she believes in challenging professional choreographers by offering them opportunities to try things they haven't attempted before. The students are able to observe and to learn from the bravery and risk-taking involved in this process. It becomes part of the training of her students to access, identify with, and participate fully



Top: *The Crew*, 1990 season, Hayman Theatre, Curtin University. Choreography: Ruth Osborne.

STEPS, Youth Dance Company. Below: *Dance South, Tasmania*. Far left: *Paquita, Alice Springs Ballet*, Darwin Performing arts Centre, 1991.



in the creative endeavour. (The necessity of this special training is one of her reasons for limiting the company intake to students from her own school.)

It is obviously part of the brief for youth ballet groups to perform in the classics. "I'm going to do a *Nutcracker* next," says Jane Pirani, Director of Extensions, "but I try to tailor things to the students, and make it relevant to them at their particular stage." Janet Karin aims to give "... a knowledge of heritage of how to approach a classic and make it *relevant now*... how to use classical technique in a contemporary way." "We are living in a changing dance world," she says. "Dance suffers from too much looking backward and I'm training dancers to look ahead and be part of a creative activity - that's why I want choreographers to do what they haven't done before."



While both classical and contemporary based groups stress the importance of dancers participating as fully as possible in the creative activity, it is particularly among those based on contemporary styles that one finds an emphasis on the group devising of performance pieces.

Some years ago in New Zealand (at the 1985 Dance and the Child International Conference¹, I watched American choreographers Shirley Ririe and Joan Woodbury working to produce material with non-dance-oriented local teenagers. Modified forms of their approach are to be found quite extensively here. The

outcome of such work is a piece with a high level of input and ideas from company members, often using extracts from class exercises in problem-solving which are then selected, structured and developed into a coherent whole by the group leader/teacher/choreographer.

Jerril Rechter, for example, who directs the *Stompin'* group in Launceston, Tasmania, focuses on giving young people with limited dance experience "the chance to develop skills in the areas of choreography and performance led by a professional choreographer ... (allowing) company members to choose the venue and decide upon themes/issues which they want to explore ... In 1992 they worked with a composer and gave very specific instructions about the style of music with which they wanted to work."



Above: *Paradise Zoo*, choreographed by Ronald Ashton. **South Australian Children's Ballet Company**, Odeon Season 1993.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Directors of youth companies are keenly aware of the importance of the existing formal education and private training commitments of the children involved. In recent years they have been assisted by increasing recognition of the educational value of the process. Twenty years ago schools were quite inflexible with regard to such "extra-curricular activities", refusing even to allow dance training to replace school sport. Now many high schools have their own dance programs, and in both Western Australia and Queensland certain schools are designated as specialist dance schools. In New South Wales there are several regional high school dance ensembles and in Sydney a High School of the Performing Arts, all working within the State education system.

The Steps company was originally founded through an initiative of the Western Australian Ministry of Education and this connection allows Ruth Osborne to schedule some work during school time, at the same time taking particular care not to encroach on private studio tuition timeslots. Beverley Waters, Director of the South Australian Children's Ballet Company, says: "Our rapport with the schools has been excellent ... they see this as an extension of (the children's) education." She tries very hard to "work in with individual ballet school commitments, as this is an important and integral part of their training." Whereas companies based on individual ballet schools are able to integrate training and performance in their programs, companies taking in students from many sources have to be very clear about the different roles of the director, on the one hand and the private teacher on the other. "I'm not specifically there to train technique," says Jane Pirani, "but to give them a performance experience, including everything that leads up to a performance ... We start with an idea, and work right through ... even (including the) bump-ins and bump-outs."

DISCIPLINE AND COMMITMENT

All the directors I spoke to see their work as providing an education in life skills which will be of value to participants whatever they do later on. Being

involved with a youth dance company is not a game or an outlet for casual recreation. Awareness of the time and energy required to see a project through needs to be instilled from the beginning.

"It's not exactly that you want to strip the glamour away," says Jane Pirani, "but you have to emphasise the total commitment necessary...I don't care how good a dancer they are if they aren't committed I can't use them." Demonstration that the participants have learned this can be a tremendous reinforcement to the group leader, as instanced by Bronwyn Liddle, who runs the Arrente Desert Posse in Alice Springs (a group of Aboriginal High School dancers working in both traditional and contemporary styles), who writes in the Northern Territory *Ausdance News*: "The dancers/students that I teach are so enthusiastic, extremely talented and inspire me to the point of sweat and pain."

SUPPORT

There is a varied picture here. A certain amount of public funding is occurring from arts and education sources at both local government and State levels, but I have not encountered any youth companies obtaining direct federal grants for their own operations. Some groups have been aided indirectly through the senior professional funded companies with which they are linked (for instance, the Dance North/Extensions partnership in Queensland) and it is also likely that development grants awarded to choreographers have enabled them to work with junior companies. I am aware that Garth Welch worked with National Capital Dancers (Canberra) while he was in receipt of a national Creative Artist Fellowship. Anthony Partos worked with Ballet d'Action (Sydney) on a composer's grant from the Music Board. In Lismore (NSW) Michael Hennesy is funded by the Australia Council (with assistance from local government) as a choreographer-in-residence, and is working on the establishment of a youth dance company for the area. As examples of State level funding, *Stompin'* (Launceston) has received an Arts Tasmania choreographer's grant, *South Australian Children's Ballet* (Adelaide) has (unspecified) support from the SA Youth Arts Board and Ballet d'Action (Sydney) has had a music grant from the NSW Ministry.

Many groups cite local government assistance and there are varying local levels of in-kind business sponsorship and donations of time and skills. But "parents and friends" will probably always be one of the most significant ingredients which make a youth company succeed, providing a pool of expertise and willing assistance with fund-raising, making sets and costumes, and so on. The trend, however, seems to be toward formalising these contributions within the structure of a "friends" organisation. Ruth Osborne, for instance, feels it is really important to get away from the old dancing school concert concept, because it does not give a true picture of what happens in professional working life.

THE DIRECTOR

The principal significant ingredient is, of course, the director (most frequently female). While some

dependence on the drive and flair of one person could be a characteristic attributed to almost any performing group, the youth group is particularly reliant on its leader and particularly vulnerable to problems which arise for that person. Ability to teach and/or choreograph does not necessarily combine with the skills needed to run a company. I asked Inara Svalbe what had been the reason for her group (The Australian Youth Ballet) folding previously and she said simply "Burnout! - I lost the plot." She had been not only choreographer and director but also designer and executor of the costumes.

Enormous energy is demonstrated by teachers like Penelope Lancaster, who not only directs *Ballet d'Action* but has initiated and developed a complete new Australian syllabus (ADAP), or Lynne Hanton (Director of the *Alice Springs Ballet Company*) who has taught in the Northern Territory for twenty years and feels duty-bound to undertake extensive and arduous travel and study to access the latest developments in order to alleviate the isolation with her geographical location.

CONCLUSION

I was impressed by the progressive attitudes demonstrated by youth company directors towards the safe physical, mental and spiritual development of their dancers. It is clear that enormous strides have been taken beyond the old attitude toward the dancer as the choreographer's puppet. Both classical and contemporary choreographers have been guilty of treating dancers as mere technical instruments to be used, abused and ultimately discarded, disregarding any individual artistic contribution which could have been made². It is to be hoped that the new breed of student produced by sensitive training will not be totally disempowered when entering what may be a considerably less-progressive professional company environment, because it is on the shoulders of the thinking artist that the future of dance will rest. Indeed, one might speculate that the emergence of the independent dance artist who chooses not to enter the confines of a company - so evident here during the past

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Fax (077) 213 014

Ausdance

THE NETWORK

National President: Shirley McKechnie OAM
National Vice-President: Keith Bain OAM
National Vice-President: Cheryl Stock

National Secretariat

PO Box 287
JAMISON ACT 2614
Ph: (06) 248 8992 Fax: (06) 247 4701
Executive Officers: Julie Dyson,
Sandra Macarthur-Onslow

Ausdance (ACT)

E Block Gorman House
Ainslie Avenue
BRADDON ACT 2601
Ph: (06) 247 9103 Fax: (06) 247 4701
Executive Officer: Jennifer Kingma

Ausdance (NSW)

Pier 4, Sea Level, The Wharf, Hickson Road
WALSH BAY NSW 2000
Ph: (02) 241 4022 Fax: (02) 241 1331
Executive Officer: Helen O Moore

Ausdance (NT)

PO Box 39541
WINNELLIE NT 0820
Ph: (089) 897 456 Fax: (089) 897 322
Executive Officer: Jane Graham

Ausdance (QLD)

c/- Metro Arts, GPO Box 24
BRISBANE QLD 4001
Ph: (07) 221 9124 Fax: (07) 221 4375
Executive Officer: Julie Chenery

Ausdance (SA)

GPO Box 1810
ADELAIDE SA 5001
Ph: (08) 231 9407 Fax: (08) 212 5699
Executive Officer: Roger Pahl

Ausdance (TAS)

c/- PO Box 25
MOWBRAY HEIGHTS TAS 7248
Ph: (003) 243 283 (w) Fax: (003) 243 679 (w)
Vice President: Rosemary Bennett

Ausdance (VIC)

170 Southbank Boulevard
SOUTH MELBOURNE VIC 3205
Ph: (03) 686 0099 Fax: (03) 686 0220
Executive Officer: Mark Gordon

Ausdance (WA)

PO Box 8423, Stirling St
PERTH WA 6849
Ph: (09) 227 6210 Fax: (09) 227 1835
Executive Officer: Jody Burton

decade - is one direct result of the enlightened creative training now being given by many youth dance company directors, studio teachers and tertiary institutions.

THANKS

I talked to and corresponded with numerous directors while I was writing these articles. I am only sorry that space has not permitted more exhaustive documentation of their individual concerns. I have tried to give an overall picture of the youth dance area, while conscious that issues such as structures and venues (mentioned in my first article) remain to be considered. I was fortunate enough to make contact with at least one company in each State and Territory, although I would have wished for more responses. A start has at least been made on examining this rapidly maturing area of dance, and I hope that the forthcoming PAB enquiry will carry further the documentation of existing and potential companies while providing an in-depth analysis of their activities.

I must particularly thank Janet Karin, National Capital Dancers (ACT), Ruth Osborne, Steps (WA) and Jane Pirani, Extensions (Qld), all of whom gave me considerable time in face-to-face interviews. Others who have contributed greatly with long letters and faxes, programs, pictures and telephone calls are (in alphabetical order): Lawrence Bendell, Northern Rivers Arts Council (NSW); Lesley Grahame, Dance South (Tas); Lynne Hanton, Alice Springs Ballet Company (NT); Lorna Hempstead, PAB Dance Committee Chair, Australia Council; Penelope Lancaster, Ballet d'Action (NSW); Maggie Miles, Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre (NT); (Jerril Rechter, Stompin' (Tas); Inara Svalbe, Australian Youth Ballet (Qld); and Beverley Waters, SA Children's Ballet (SA).

Finally, my thanks to the Ausdance organisation, particularly Jody Burton (WA), Julie Chenery (Qld), Ngaire Creed (national office), Julie Dyson (national office), Mark Gordon (Vic), Lesley Graham (Tas), Elspeth Hurse (NT), Jennifer Kingma (ACT), Helen O'More (NSW) and Roger Pahl (SA), whose advice and newsletters helped me greatly.

NOTES:

1. The 1994 **DANCE AND THE CHILD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE** is to be held in Sydney, July 13-20, 1994. For more information contact:

David Spurgeon
Program Chair
University of NSW
PO Box 88
Oatley NSW 2233.
Tel: (02) 570 0709.

2. Discussions at Green Mill centring on the relationship between dancer and choreographer highlighted major concerns in this area (see my article in the April issue of *Lowdown*.)



Top: **Australian Youth Ballet**, courtesy Inara Svalbe. Centre: *Concerto en Blanc* (1990). **Alice Springs Ballet**, Darwin Performing Arts Centre. Choreography Anthony Pennell. Above: Terrie-Anne John and Lisa Wilson in *Taking Flight*, **Dance North**. Choreography Cheryl Stock and Jane Pirani. Photo: Ned Kelly.

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