

Dance practitioner with a difference



STEPPING OUT: Philip Channells has created The Corner Dance Lab in Federal for people with or without disability.

PHOTO: VEDA DANTE

Changing culture's view of disabilities one step at a time

VEDA DANTE

PROFESSIONAL contemporary dance choreographer Philip Channells believes that working with people who have a disability gives him a broader palette to create from.

"We all bring our unique life experience to the studio. Whether you're a person with a disability or not, we all have a lived experience," he said matter-of-factly.

Now creative director of Dance Integrated Australia, the Coffs Harbour-born dancer trained at the Northern Rivers Conservatorium of Arts and has spent the past 15 years championing social justice in the arts throughout Australia and Europe.

"I work with people with physical and sensory impairment, perceived learning disabilities, mental illness,

acquired brain injury, HIV, AIDS – the list goes on," he said.

"In my experience, everyone can dance in their own unique way."

Recipient of a 2012 Human Rights Award from the Australian Human Rights Commission, the 44 year old said he realised early in his career that people with disabilities were marginalised in the performing arts.

After receiving professional development funding from the Australia Council in 2005, Mr Channells spent the summer studying at UK's eminent Candoco Dance Company, an outfit that achieved global acclaim three years later when its involvement at the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games saw artists with disabilities perform in the events for the first time in Games history.

"I immersed myself in the culture of dance and disability and worked with some really amazing artists, including Candoco's co-founder Adam Benjamin, who took me under his wings and showed me what was possible."

Mr Channells said he seized the opportunity to return to Australia in 2009 and work as artistic director of Restless Dance Theatre in Adelaide,

Australia's leading dance company working with young disabled and non-disabled people.

"Having worked with people with disability for my entire dance career has given me a very different attitude about dance and who can, who can't,



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Philip Channells

and what a dancer looks like in terms of choreography," he said.

"I love the challenge of working with people's strengths, finding out what makes them tick, and challenging each dancer to go beyond what they would expect of themselves."

After a three-year tenure with Restless, Mr Channells has returned to the Northern Rivers to co-found The Corner Dance Lab, a residency program for people of all ages with or

without disability.

Held earlier this month at Jasper Corner in Federal – the newly minted space containing the local hall and former church – the inaugural week-long program of disability-inclusive dance saw more

"What was truly amazing about the first day of the project was that, although there were people there who had never worked in a truly inclusive environment, the stereotypes and barriers that we normally face in dance were non-existent," he explained.

"Everyone was willing to extend themselves beyond my expectations and equally contributed to the creative process in such a way that has opened many doors for future possibilities."

Mr Channells continued: "I like to challenge and inspire dancers to look for a new and authentic quality of movement from their own life experience."

"My overall vision is to generate high-quality artistic outcomes and develop exciting opportunities for artists to excel in dance."

Luella Copeland-Smith from the Federal School of Arts Association committee said The Corner Dance Lab was a great example of what Jasper Corner stood for.

"It's about collaboration, community and culture and we're really excited by the idea," she explained.

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