

Behind the Scenes

Volume 8, Issue 1

2010

Former Royal New Zealand Ballet dancer, Kate Venables, has designed the costumes for *A Song in the Dark*, choreographed by another ex-RNZB dancer, Andrew Simmons. It is part of the TOWER Season of *From Here to There* which tours seven New Zealand centres in late February and March. She talks to Wellington Friend Judith Doyle.



Injury is every dancer's nightmare — the ghost that hovers at the feast. When Kate Venables injured her back after six years with the RNZB, her world fell apart. Treatment helped, especially Pilates. But it became obvious that she needed a long recuperation.

So in 2007 she made the heartbreaking decision to stop. She returned to Lucinda, Queensland, to consider her future. After much agonizing she decided, given her passion for the arts and the theatre, that there was no future for her in her hometown. An offer to work on the RNZB reception desk was highly welcome and she returned to Wellington.

While working for the RNZB, she did a local Pilates course to get certification as a teacher and on completion was offered work by two Pilates studios. She found it hard being on the reception desk and seeing her friends continue their dancing life. So after 18 months, she left to teach Pilates. She enjoys it and the hours are flexible which allow for other interests and projects.

Art is a passion. She has always visited art galleries and exhibitions whenever possible. All her life she has loved drawing (and sewing) — fashion, costuming, design, leatherwork. She has the ability to draw something she sees (or imagines) exactly.

Five years ago, while she was still dancing, she designed the costumes for *Si Superias*. By Turid Revfeim, currently RNZB ballet mistress, this ballet was part of the 2005 *Tutus on Tour*. Kate's sharp red and black layered costumes neatly expressed the fiery spirit of the tango which inspired the work.

Her current design commission was more challenging as choreographer Andrew Simmons was in Germany during the design stage of the work. But both were friends while in the company, so Kate knows the sort of choreography that Andrew favours and he knows her work. Plus email ensures that distance is not too much of a problem.

"First he gave me basic ideas, guidelines, colour schemes and so on," she said. "We discussed them. I drew a lot of different ideas, trying to make them very clear. We exchanged several drafts and I developed them to show the wardrobe department and get their advice. Further drawings went back to Andrew for him to make choices before I did the final draft."

In costume design, it's an enormous advantage being a dancer. Not only because you know first-hand that costumes must allow fluid movement and which fabrics work best for this, but also because a dancer can try them on at mock-up stage. Kate did a few movements and the wardrobe department could adjust accordingly.

"In modern ballet you don't want the costumes to distract from the movement. I wanted the girls to feel beautiful and confident in them. So I tried to give Drew what he wanted aesthetically but also do something that I knew the girls would be confident dancing in. I love graduated colour. I love tones and shades," she said, "And I love drapery."

She designed the boys' costumes in this ballet too which is not really more difficult than female costumes for her, she says, as costumes for modern ballet have a basic structure. "It's all about movement at the end of the day."

Kate has chosen green for *A Song in the Dark*. "When you light a colour it changes," she said, "With green, you can pull elements of yellow out of it, elements of brown, black, blue — quite a broad spectrum. With green, you can change the mood of the ballet."

Kate is determined to pursue activities that have links with theatre and the arts. She has had several performance commissions for Weta Workshop —

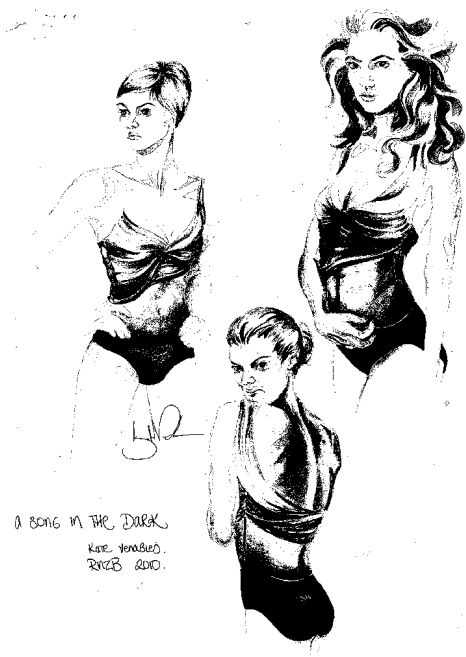
continued on p 2

acting, doing puppetry and modelling: digital reference modelling as it's called. For example the skin of Neytiri (in the new film Avatar) was made more realistic by being based on photographs of Kate's skin!

A computer company has employed her for 'motion capture' which is a niche avenue Kate has been wanting to pursue for some time. This involves acting out different moves such as running, climbing and attack moves. These are then applied to characters in computer games.

In January, more motion capture work took her to New York and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. She explained that every joint in the body has a certain range of motion which she has learned through dance. This can be captured by special 3D cameras and the information used in all sorts of ways including making characters in computer-generated movies more real.

Kate may have had to face the end of her first-choice career — one that brought her considerable success too. But she is busy finding a new niche in the artistic world including that of cyberspace!



A SONG IN THE DARK
KATE VENABLES
RNZB 2010

Kate Venables' sketches for *A Song in the Dark* costumes

Pointes to Note

- In December the Friends of the Ballet donated a further \$15,000 to the RNZB – a huge thank you to our members who made this possible.
- Karen Mackersy, RNZB Development Co-ordinator will from January be the Friends of the Ballet dedicated point of contact within the RNZB.
- For events in your area during the TOWER Season of *From Here to There* visit www.nzballet.org.nz/community. Also look out

for our partnered dancers Abigail Boyle and Qi Huan in the stunning season posters.

In Memoriam Rigmor Gnatt Honorary Life Member Friends of the Royal New Zealand Ballet

Rigmor Gnatt, nee Stroyberg, widow of RNZB's founding artistic director, Poul Gnatt, died on 28 December, 2009. Sir Jon Trimmer spoke at her funeral: "Many of us believe that without Rigmor there would not have been a lasting ballet company in New Zealand."

The Gnatt family's contribution to the cultural life of New Zealand is huge yet they never sought fame for that. The company is the monument, and Rigmor was thrilled to be made an honorary lifetime member of Friends of the Ballet.

Family, friends and colleagues gathered for the farewell in the beautiful garden of Golden Eagles, the Otaki home shared with her partner of ten years, Ian Polglase. Rigmor and Poul had bought it in 1991 as their retirement home, so it is a house that has seen much happiness, reflected in a moving and gracious service.

Rigmor and Poul had four sons – Jan, Per, Tor & Fin. Poul adored his boys but was often away on extended tours, so Rigmor cared for them alone. The treasured bonds with their mother were apparent as each of the sons spoke (with Fin's family sending messages from Norway).

Rigmor was involved in much of the ballet's work, albeit from behind the scenes, 1953-63, and 1969-70.

She described learning by trial and error how to design a well-fitting tutu, but the 400 costumes she made were the least of it. Family photo albums show dancers baby-sitting and helping in the kitchen, or the family on camping holidays in the company truck Poul had converted for the purpose. All such stories reveal the courage, patience and good humour of this beautiful, fun-loving yet self-effacing woman.

There was a lovely lightness of being about Rigmor. Son Per recalled: "Mor had high standards and expected the same of others, yet whenever someone less than favourite was mentioned, she would say – "I don't think I like that person very much. Now could we talk about something else?"

Through the last weeks of her life, when health was failing, Per and his wife Andrea Pender reported that Rigmor's often repeated words were "Thank you... wonderful ... excellent". One might say she died as she had lived.

Jennifer Shennan

Contact us:

Susie Clarke, National Administrator
P O Box 27 050 Wellington 6141
Ph: 04 381 9009 Email: susie@nzballet.org.nz