

The Australian Youth Dance Festival – Supporting youth dance outside of school

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Ausdance advocates to decision makers at all levels, federal, state, territory, and local, and partners with other organizations to bring new resources to dance. The organization works with dance practitioners, educators, scholars, and advocates to promote dance and profile its benefits through projects such as the Australian Youth Dance Festival (AYDF) and the Australian Dance Awards. AYDF was initiated by Ausdance National in 1997, and is a unique event on the Australian dance calendar with its focus on indigenous dance culture, creative development, and site-specific work. Its aim is to emphasize the value of dance for young people, both within education systems and beyond. The AYDF focuses on the region in which the festival is held, the stories of local indigenous people, and some of the ways in which these stories might be interpreted through dance. The AYDF profiles Australia's rich regional and cultural diversity by holding each festival in a different region:

- 1997 – Darwin, Northern Territory
- 1999 – Townsville, Queensland
- 2001 – Armidale, NSW
- 2004 – Armidale, NSW
- 2006 – Horsham, Victoria
- 2009 – Mandurah, Western Australia
- 2012 – Mt. Penang Gardens, Gosford NSW

Participants of the AYDF include pre-professional dance artists, youth dance company members, school students, and relative beginners in dance, as well as dance teachers and Australia's youth dance leaders. The festival has provided almost 2,000 young people from across Australia and overseas with forums, workshops, choreographic activities, and performances, led by a team of professional choreographers, teachers, and dancers. An artistic director facilitates the event by coordinating artistic support for tutors and indigenous advisers, facilitating daily showings and discussion about emerging movement ideas and advising on the final site-specific performances by the various tutor groups. The tutors are leading choreographers who are experienced in working with young people, and community dance artists who guide creative processes with students and teachers, and facilitate learning about local stories through dance.



Image 1: AYDF April 2012. Students performing in the Puddle Garden, Mt. Penang Gardens, NSW.
Choreographer: Lee Pemberton. Photo: Julie Dyson.



Image 2: AYDF April 2012. Students performing in the Dragon Garden, Mt. Penang Gardens, NSW.
Choreographer: Sue Healey. Photo: Julie Dyson.

The AYDF encourages young people to make, perform, and learn about dance through creating dance stories, particularly in regional Australia. The young people's story-telling skills are developed by:

- Engaging with local indigenous communities and inviting them to tell the stories of the land and its people.
- Facilitating indigenous elders to guide the choreographers and students through local historical sites.
- Supporting tutors and students to develop these stories through dance over the following week.
- Presenting the works in a site-specific performance on the final day, and inviting local residents to participate as audience members.



Image 3: AYDF 11 April 2004. Indigenous elder telling the story of the massacre at Apsley Falls, Armidale, NSW. Photo: Julie Dyson.



Image 4: AYDF October 2001. Students working with Indigenous elders in Townsville Park and performing on Magnetic Island. Artistic directors: Beth Shelton & David McMicken. Photos: Julie Dyson.

The Festival also provides opportunities for young people to discuss youth dance policy, meet decision-makers, and offer recommendations for the sector, many of which are acted upon by funding bodies and organizations. And it provides teacher development through participation and networking, knowledge-sharing, curriculum discussions, performance preparation, and skill development.

Keywords: youth, indigenous, festival, dance, regional

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Julie Dyson is the former National Director of the Australian Dance Council – Ausdance. Her work has included development of Ausdance policy for dance in Australia, and advice to funding bodies, government departments, companies, and individual artists. She has edited many publications, including *Shaping the Landscape – Celebrating Dance in Australia* (2011), and has initiated innovative partnerships to promote and support contemporary practice, performers, and educators. She is currently Secretary of the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific, and a member of the WDA Global Executive. She was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2007.

All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1