



# More than a tour

West Australian Ballet's touring program is about more than just shows – in fact, they're an entire holistic experience. Consultant Kristopher McDowell explains all to PAY

**W**hen we think of touring shows, we think of just that: the shows themselves. Whether it's an opera, a play or a ballet, everything is geared towards that hour or two on stage. It's the top of a very steep pyramid, with everything else as mere support.

Or at least, that's how things used to be. Because some companies – like West Australian Ballet – are taking a different approach. Rather than every aspect being subservient to the final show, instead every aspect of the tour is a chance to make an impact.

"For us it's important that the company leaves a positive footprint wherever we go," explains WAB touring consultant Kristopher McDowell. "Whether that's community programs, residencies, talks or anything else.

"A performance is just one part of it, and of course there is a limit to how many people can see that – especially if you're only playing one or two times in a given town. So actually all our other activities can have

a much wider impact and reach far more people. It's a different approach, but it's one we really believe in and that I'm proud of."

As well as increasing the reach of the company, it also has practical benefits, continues McDowell:

"When you're on the road with 70-plus people in a traditional touring format, it's hard to keep everyone occupied and motivated. There's lots of down time for the crew, and some of the dancers might not be taking part in every performance.

"But with our approach, almost everyone has something to do throughout the entire tour. It keeps everyone excited and motivated. And it also means we're not wasting the talent we have – we're making the best use of our entire team. That means wherever we go, local people get full impact of WAB."

There's also a potential financial benefit to WAB's attitude.

Traditionally, the company would have only been able to build partnerships with other ballet companies and venues. And any funds they were applying for would likely have been primarily for touring expenses.

But now, WAB can reach out for cooperation with all kinds of partners, from community groups to universities and other educational institutions – really, anywhere that a workshop can take place. And they might also be eligible for funding streams that wouldn't cover traditional touring activities.

"All of our projects are now massively scalable and they are all geared to have multiple entry points within the community," enthuses McDowell. "So the performance is really just the icing on the cake."

In other words, the model is extremely flexible. This flexibility also extends to the shows themselves.

"For example, in Mainland China they're looking for a very neoclassical program. So we have to make sure we can offer that. We'll be sending dancers to China in October of this year, and then to North America in 2025.

"Meanwhile in the US, obviously our outstanding offer is that we have so much incredible Indigenous work. So, there's a chance for partnerships and collaborations on that front. We love working with North American companies and connecting Indigenous artists from across the globe.

"The key is being flexible. How can we produce shows that have sets, lights and costumes that are adaptable and scalable? If we can do that, we can reduce our travel costs and spend greater amounts on engagement work and reach as many people as possible."

As well as touring opportunities, the company is also in an exciting phase of transition. After 10 successful years, artistic director Aurélien Scannella has left the company. In his place comes legendary dancer David McAllister, who is now the company's interim artistic director.

"The dancers of this company have been raised to such a high level under Aurélien's leadership, and that will create a lot of opportunities for David," notes McDowell. "For example, a lot of major international choreographers are vying for the chance to work with us. And that's not something that would have happened 10, 15 years ago.

"So, I think David's tenure will see an increasing openness to new work, bringing in the next generation of choreographers. Now that we have that base of talent here, I think David will really be able to stretch them and challenge them and push them in new directions. That will keep things fresh, which is always important – to feel like you're on a journey, rather than feeling like you've already arrived."

## "We're not wasting the talent we have – we're making the best use of our entire team"

McDowell hopes that at least some of these new works will be in the form of international co-commissions: "Those things are really important for a company like WAB. They allow us to produce works of scale that really impress, and to expand our reach. It also makes sense to combine the financial and artistic talents of multiple companies, so that WAB's work can be seen by more people than ever before.

"We had a wildly successful co-production of Krzysztof Pastor's *Dracula* with the Queensland Ballet just before the pandemic, and that really showed the power of what co-commissions can do. Right now

we're looking to find similar success with international partnerships. But of course, it has to be with the right companies: ones that are aligned on both a quality and budgetary level."

Speaking of budgets, another aspect of McDowell's work is finding new revenue streams for WAB... including some rather unexpected ones.

"At the moment we're working on a lot of digital content," he asserts. "There will artist interactions, and performances that are designed specifically for this space.

"It could be a potential money maker, and it also continues are mission of reaching as many people as possible. Many people won't see us in a theatre – either because of cost, accessibility or availability. But almost everyone can see us online.

"Of course, any investment carries a risk, but I think it's important that we try new things and aren't afraid to

be bold. For example, the data we gather online can allow us to target our touring at markets where we know there is a demand.

"We have to learn from our brothers and sisters in the private, where social media and AI is already being successfully harnessed. If we can build things online that people really enjoy – and use the data we gather there to drive our decision making processes – then I think that's a huge benefit not only for us, but for the sector."

**WAB is represented by KMP Artists and worked with Rhizome Consulting for strategic International engagements and resource partnerships. For more information, email [admin@kmpartists.com](mailto:admin@kmpartists.com)**



GLENDIA GARCIA GOMEZ AND OSCAR VALDÉS IN ALICE TOPP'S OPEN HEART STORY.  
PHOTO BY BRADBURY PHOTOGRAPHY