



THE AUSTRALIAN

Company renewal in a bold step

Sydney Dance Company has taken an intriguing risk with the appointment of new artistic director Tanja Liedtke, writes **Deborah Jones**

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LAST September, Tanja Liedtke was one of the emerging choreographers taking part in a Melbourne project called Dance Creation 2006, for which young choreographers were nominated by the artistic director of a leading dance company. Liedtke was put forward by Graeme Murphy of Sydney Dance Company.

Today the 29-year-old is artistic director-elect of the country's biggest contemporary dance outfit and will take over from Murphy in October.

No one saw it coming, that's for sure, and surprise was the initial response from dance insiders. With that reaction out of the way, however, there was a feeling that the SDC board might not have gone completely mad, but may have made a bold and stimulating appointment.

Is it risky? Of course, although SDC chairman and head of the selection panel, Tom Dery, says the choice of any of the other short-listed candidates - believed to have included Australian Dance Theatre's Garry Stewart and New York-based Stephen Petronio - would have been just as risky. "It's the nature of contemporary dance," he says.

"I'm really pleased that the board has taken a bold step and is up for it," Liedtke said yesterday. "Yes, it's going to be different, but I feel privileged to be Graeme's successor. Sydney Dance Company is a gem in the Australian dance landscape."

Murphy, for his part, calls her outstanding.

The German-born, Sydney-based Liedtke looks and sounds composed as she is quizzed about her plans for the company and speaks eagerly, if generally, about her appointment.

"I'm passionate about the possibilities for the art form in this country," she says.

"I love dance and I love Australian dancers and artists.

"I've been working here for 10 years and I'm always coming back."

Liedtke is far from being the kind of dancer who left school at 15 and knows nothing else. She has moved around a great deal, growing up in three countries and completing her high school in Britain. She started a media and communications course at Macquarie University in Sydney when her dance career appeared to be in the doldrums (it wasn't for long).

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She would have made a good lawyer, one suspects, as she steers through the shoals of an interview for a long time before getting her feet under the desk.

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The caution is perhaps understandable. She doesn't officially start until October 2 and this year's remaining work is all Murphy's. The company is touring pieces from the repertoire across Australia before presenting a return season of Berlin in Sydney in October.

Liedtke prefers, too, not to talk about the company's finances, which have been rocky, nor will she comment on whether she will be retaining the SDC's present dancers, who are on one-year contracts. The number of dancers doesn't seem to be an issue, however: Dery told The Australian yesterday that the level of 17 dancers will be maintained, and Liedtke said the size of the company is part of what attracted her to the job.

So what attracted the SDC board to her?

Despite being pretty much under the radar when it comes to the general public, Liedtke is hardly a choreographic novice. She has made work here and abroad, and won last year's Australian Dance Award for outstanding achievement in choreography for Twelfth Floor, which toured widely and received splendid reviews from the country's leading critics.

"Rich, powerful and compelling," said Alan Brissenden, The Australian's Adelaide dance critic. "Brilliantly incisive and perceptive ... laugh-aloud funny and tragic, in turns and at the same time," wrote Jill Sykes in The Sydney Morning Herald.

Lee Christofis, dance curator for the National Library of Australia, says Liedtke's work is complex. "She addresses serious matters through immediately communicable means. If you're an aficionado of contemporary dance, it won't be hard to read her work. Graeme's audience wouldn't find it hard to get her message."

Liedtke describes her choreographic style as having two very different aspects: "There is a sense of physicality; high physicality placed within a theatrical context."

These qualities suggest Liedtke has been influenced by two important Australian choreographers she has worked with: Stewart at ADT, where she danced for four years, and UK-based Lloyd Newson, whose DV8 Physical Theatre she joined in 2003.

"They are two artists I have a huge amount of respect for," she says, "but I do have a very particular choreographic style, driven by my own vision and need to communicate."

Willowy, with pale red hair and striking grey-green eyes, Liedtke comes armed with an eclectic CV. She was born in Stuttgart, but her father's work took the family to Madrid when she was just three. She lived there until she was 11. "It was a fantastic time," she says. "It was post-Franco and there was a vibrant cultural explosion. It was amazing." She started her dance lessons there, surrounded by flamenco but studying classical dance.

A family move to London gave Liedtke the chance to study ballet seriously in tandem with her secondary school studies at Elmhurst. When she was 15, however, the availability of a music-theatre strand introduced her to contemporary dance. It was her eureka moment: "Once I discovered that, I was off."

Her father, who works for the German company Bosch, was posted to Melbourne when she was 18 and she decided to test out Australia, having seen and admired Australian dancers. The spirit of the place suited her nature. "It's complete energy and focus: only good things can come out of that. Eat it up, go for it," she says.

Liedtke beat a field of 54 candidates from across the world for the SDC appointment. The initial list was culled to about 10, and then to five. Murphy was an adviser until the short list stage.

Petronio, who choreographed one of SDC's biggest recent hits, Underland, tells The Australian that he loves the company and had been very interested in the position. However, he'd been offered a co-directorship with Liedtke, and that was not acceptable. Dery, while declining to confirm this, told The Australian yesterday that the board had looked at an alternative model but decided it would not work.

Petronio said yesterday that he thought Liedtke was great and wished her all the best.

Dery, while declining to discuss Petronio directly, says the decision wasn't a question of making a local rather than an international appointment. "It was a matter of taking on an emergent talent rather than an established choreographer. This was the pivotal point as far as the board was concerned. Contemporary dance should be fresh, should be vital, should change quickly."

He describes Liedtke as a "very, very impressive, powerful personality with intellect and character and inspiration. Internationally, Tanja probably has more appeal than the other applicants. She's in huge demand overseas. We will have far more demand for Sydney Dance through Tanja and the quality of the collaborations will be more international and of a higher standard that we have seen.

"Tanja will bring relevance: that's more important than anything. Tanja fitted better than everyone."

Dancer Bradley Chatfield, who has been with the SDC for 16 years, says it's a great relief to find out who it is. "The dancers are happy that it's someone young and full of ideas. She's very optimistic, enthusiastic and excited. It shows great promise for those who will work with her next year."

And what does Liedtke want to say to those long-term SDC fans who open their paper's today and say, "Tanja who?"

"Be curious. Be as bold as the board has been. Come along for the ride."

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