

“You want to be
the best.”



Sally Clark catches up with a man with a passion for making his students shine.

A SMALL BOY STANDS before a wall with his arms outstretched, marvelling at how the shadows react to his every move. He returns to the wall often, to create the dancing shadows, but is always changing their moves, and evolving their dance – just to see how clever they can be.

Forty years on, that small boy – now grown – has enjoyed a successful career as one of Australia's best freelance commercial dancers. He's choreographed innumerable corporate and theatre productions and can also lay claim to having trained and mentored a successive generation of incredibly talented artists.

Robert Sturrock always harboured a really strong desire to dance, but growing up in the working class suburb of Lalor, in Melbourne's north, didn't provide an opportunity to investigate this interest. So his younger self placated that yearning

by experimenting with his dancing shadows on the wall. "I guess that's why I like line so much," he realises now.

He left school at 14 and began working in a local timber mill. The income finally provided him with a means to realise his dream to dance.

"My parents couldn't afford to pay for my dance lessons, so that's how I paid for them. I started dancing when I was 14 – just at a local school, with a teacher called Bruce Saunders. He was a martial arts teacher as well as a ballroom exhibition teacher – so all my strength as a dancer and skills as a pas de deux partner came from him.

"He had me lifting 30-year-old girls when I was 14 years old," he continues jokingly. "Doing 'the spinner'." (This is a lift for which Sturrock and his protégés are famous. It involves the boy taking his partner into a full press and then while

he holds her horizontally – one hand supporting her neck and the other supporting her inner thigh – spins on the spot with her twirling atop his head). "So that's how I learned all that!"

At age 16 he was accepted into the Victorian College of the Arts but "because I hadn't finished my schooling – I had to go straight in to the tertiary course". His training at the college rounded him out technically but he only stayed for about 18 months before landing a job at Melbourne's (now defunct) Swagman Theatre Restaurant when he was seventeen. He stayed for four years. The commitment to that show was seven nights a week, 365 days a year – but that still didn't stop him from working on television shows like the Simon Gallaher series, *The Saturday Show* and *Countdown* as well as attending dance classes – doing all these during the day and before he went off to the Swagman at night – every single night -- for five years!

The next phase of his career saw him working for "pretty much everyone in this country: Jillian (Fitzgerald), Tony (Bartuccio), David (Atkins), Kelly Abbey, Dein Perry, Ross Coleman, Jane Beckett and Joe Latona", on television, in cabaret and the clubs. He also performed in the theatre productions of *Dancin' Man*, *Dynamite*, *Cats*, *A Chorus Line*, *Oklahoma* and the opera *Aida*.

At the same time, Sturrock also began teaching dance -- firstly in Melbourne for Barbara Lynch and then his own private classes on the Gold Coast where he moved when performing at shows in Jupiter's Casino. The classes "took off" and gave him enough confidence to consider opening his own dance school in the area following the conclusion of *A Chorus Line* in 1994.

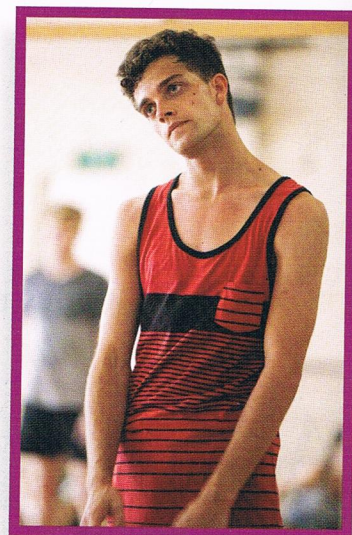
His first group of students at the Gold Coast school known as Industry Dance included Ashley Wallen (now based in the UK, she is choreographer of *Ghost – the Musical*, *Friends with Benefits*, *T Mobile Flash Mob*); Adam Williams (choreographer on SYTYCD Series 1, 2 and 3); Sean Mulligan (Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*, Pforzheimer in *Legally Blonde*); Zac Brazenas (see quote);

Inspiring generations of dancers: Robert Sturrock teaching at The Space in Prahran, Melbourne.

All photos: BELINDA STRODDER

"The best thing I learned from Robert was that you have to work hard (very hard) and be versatile as a performer. Robert's classes would sometimes go for three hours. Our warm ups would go for at least an hour. And from my years with Robert, there must be at least well over a dozen or more very successful dancers that he produced!"

– Zac Brazenas (now based in the US, he has danced in the Kylie Minogue/Celine Dion world tours and Katy Perry/J Lo promo tours);



Absorbed: student in Sturrock's class.

Kate Wormald (SYTYCD Series 1 – Top 3, *Happy Feet* a1 & 2) and Ame' Delves (choreographer for SYTYCD). He also trained Shannon Holtzapffel and Kane Bonke (see quotes) and Jesse Rasmussen (SYTYCD – Series 3, *Happy Feet* 1 & 2) among many talented others.

But the defining thing about all these past protégés – aside from the fact that they are among the most sought-after performers and choreographers working in the industry – is how many of them are also enjoying huge international careers and in both the UK and the USA.

Ever humble, Sturrock acknowledges that although he worked hard to give these performers a great dance education, "you can't do it without the right students!" But as a teacher he also reminded them (and often): "If you want to go to Melbourne or Sydney from here, you want to be the best! When you walk

in that door . . . you want to be the best!"

He ran his dance school on the Gold Coast for nine years, but the final year he also ran a school in Melbourne, concurrently – spending half the week in Queensland and the other half in Melbourne. His current dance school in Melbourne's Werribee has now been running for the past 10 years, with a full-time course for seven years, though he took a year off last year.

He's back on deck with a full-time course for 2012, and in new premises in Brunswick, but his priority – still – is to make sure his students have the best training they can. He sums up his brand of teaching this way:

"Everything that I've learned and that I'm teaching now is about learning from the inside out. First – you have to find out who they are, as people. Find their weaknesses as dancers and then work on their weaknesses. And teach them how

to teach themselves. And that's what a lot of people don't do these days. You have to be able to explain what you want them to do.

"I say to them, every time you're about to move something you need to think from your core, straight away. And I teach them what to look for – and, I also, teach them how to be in the business so that you can be employable."

He continues: "They also learn that to be a good dancer – and I'm not talking in a physical sense – you have to be honest with yourself. If you are honest with yourself then being good at what you do isn't such a big deal. It's just what you do, and you should be good at it – because you're passionate about it."

Obviously Sturrock's wisdom is still sound. Since starting his full-time course in Melbourne, former students have continued to make their mark in all the major musicals





Sturrock with professional dancer Ellen Sutton.

“Robert trains and produces the best, hardest working and busiest dancers in the industry. Genius teacher!”

– Kane Bonke (dancer in ‘Fame’, ‘Footloose’, ‘Hot Shoe Shuffle’, ‘Crazy for You’ as well as ‘Happy Feet’ 1 & 2)

“A true teacher. A mentor. A master. [he is] not about the money, nor about ego. His goal was, and still is, to make the best out of his dancers, and that’s what he has done, for myself, and many others...”

– Shannon Holtzapffel (principle dancer in Michael Jackson’s ‘This Is It’ concert/movie and Kylie Minogue’s Aphrodite “Les Folies” tour).

as well as securing the cream of the freelance professional work on offer.

In recognition of his talent, other dance schools hire him to teach their students. In 2004, Sydney’s Brent Street Studios would fly Sturrock from Melbourne to Sydney once a week to work with their full-time students and their professional dancers coming to their “Pro Class”. “They used to fly me every Tuesday. I had to get up at 4 o’clock in the morning and catch the “red-eye” to Sydney and then I would teach from 9am to 4pm. I would teach the “Pro Class” from 6.30pm to 8pm and then fly back to Melbourne. I used to get home at midnight.”

And all this work with so many budding professionals over the years has taught him much about what it takes to be truly successful.

“Something that I’ve learned with full-time is, if you’ve got students that you even have to push slightly, they are not the ones who will make it. There have been about 20 students who have gone on to do show, after show, after show, but they were the ones I never had to push. They were the ones who were

doing their own singing lessons in their own spare time. You *never* had to tell them to work hard – or be there on time!”

He also despairs of the trend these days for young people to be more interested in being famous than in dancing well. “Dancers these days, their passion to be *someone* is bigger than their passion for dance. It’s got to be the other way around. When I was younger I wasn’t passionate about being a star – I was passionate about being a chorus boy, and that’s what I became. All I wanted to be was on stage, with good dancers, doing good routines, having a good time and expressing myself – and that’s what I did. Well I think that’s why I’ve been successful, in the end, because I didn’t want to be (just) famous.

“They also want to learn how to run before they can walk. You have to learn how to do the basics, properly, before you can do anything else. But the young kids don’t get that – but that’s where it’s the teacher’s job to make sure they understand that. (Also) All young dancers want to be in the front but you have to know when you are supposed to be in the front – and when you are not!”

For those dancers who haven’t had the privilege of learning from Sturrock, here is some typical advice:

“Be the best you can be! Not for anybody else – but for yourself. And I think, with that -- and that’s not taking any shortcuts – then eventually, you are going to be happy. I danced around my lounge room, when I was a kid – whether there was anybody looking or not! I feel that has been lost a bit.”

His passion fires up as he speaks: “I love teaching people and seeing other people *do* well. I think it’s because I did well – and I had a ball – and I want to see other people have a good time and get that, too!”

Sturrock also often produces small theatre shows for venues like Theatre Works, Gasworks and the National Theatre. Past shows have enjoyed great success and full houses, and he’s always looking for talented dancers – so if you want a chance to work with the best – keep your eyes open for his auditions for these shows.