



Jumping from novice to star

Nerida Matthaei has leaped from one dance success to another, writes

Marie-Christine Sourris

IT'S hard to picture Nerida Matthaei ever sitting still.

The 28-year-old independent artist literally hasn't stopped dancing since she slipped on her very first pair of ballet slippers at the age of three.

By the time Matthaei turned 13, she was studying full-time at Canberra's National Capital Ballet School (think *Fame*) with dance classes all day and school studies in the afternoon.

But it wasn't until Matthaei started performing after hours for Canberra's first youth dance company, Quantum Leap, that she entertained the idea of a career in the arts.

"It was really influential in deciding that was something I wanted to do as a career. It was the first time I ever choreographed something on my own," says Matthaei of the Australian Choreographic Centre, known as QL2.

"Even though I was still in high school and probably had no idea what I was doing, it really inspired me to follow it further."

Further north, that is, where Matthaei spent the next three years at Queensland University of Technology completing bachelor studies in dance followed by an honours year researching choreographic practice.

"I love choreography and I really enjoy doing it, but I also really enjoy going to the studio and just going, 'All right, I'm a dancer, what would you like me to do?'," says Matthaei.

"I think you get totally different things from both of those (elements)."

This year, Matthaei was selected as an inaugural artist in Youth Arts Queensland's JUMP – a national mentorship program for artists aged 18-30 in the first five years of professional practice, funded by the Australia Council for the Arts.

To Matthaei's excitement, it teamed her up with Natalie Weir, director of Expressions Dance Company, enabling her to co-direct her own show, *Polarity*.

"It's kind of a love story that may or may not end well," hints Matthaei.

"The idea behind it is pretty simple – it's playing with the polarity of a love-hate relationship and exploring the emotional content."

Four dancers from Expressions Dance Company – Elise May, Samantha Mitchell, Anthony Trojman and Timothy Brown – tell the tale of two young couples "who play the same characters but at different stages in their lives".

"I've definitely got some per-

sonal experience I could draw from for the work," laughs Matthaei, "but it's also just using other people's experiences and things you pick up in life.

"It's theatre, so it's always a bit more dramatic.

"The dancers are very creative. There's really not too much they can't do, so the possibilities are endless."

Having Weir oversee her choreographic work for the first time, and working with Weir on the company's other performances, has been a wonderful opportunity, says Matthaei.

Not that she could exactly be called a novice – Matthaei has been choreographing since graduating from uni, when she launched dance collective Phluxus in 2006 with fellow QUT alumni Skye Sewell and Chafia Brooks.

"Anyone who works in the dance industry knows it's really hard to get a fulltime contract straight away," says Matthaei, who has taught for Expressions, Raw Dance, Arts Council and various dance schools in Brisbane.

"We decided we wanted to make our own work after uni and forge our own pathway."

Their first work, *The Machine the Carries the Soul*, launched to critical



acclaim – also runners-up in the 2006 Melbourne Fringe Festival for Best Performance in Dance/Movement – before the girls turned it into a full-length piece and performed it around Australia.

Twelve months ago, Matthaei performed a solo from it in New York's American Dance Guild Festival.

"It was an awesome experience, especially considering that a lot of the really famous and pioneering contemporary dance companies come from there," she says.

"I got to do classes with the Martha Graham company and the Merce Cunningham company, and do a bit of professional development type stuff at the same time."

Two months later, Matthaei, Sewell and Brooks were off on a one-month residency at Ireland's Firkin Crane arts centre in Cork, developing a new project called *Boiling Point*, which Matthaei will mount in Brisbane in November.

"It's really about creating opportunities for Brisbane local dancers who are choreographers

and performers," says Matthaei.

"We're certainly not the first people to do it. But it requires dedication – pushing yourself creatively and making your own work."

Polarity plays the Judith Wright Centre tomorrow and Tuesday. Free, but bookings essential on 3852 3655. Applications for JUMP 2011 close October 22. For details of information sessions (in Brisbane tomorrow and the Gold Coast on Thursday) visit jumpmentoring.com.au

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Dancing Queens: Nerida Matthaei with her mentor Natalie Weir (above) and Polarity (main picture)