



FEATURE

## ROSS HANNAFORD: THE PLAY OF DANCE

The musical theatre performer, teacher and director believes that acting should be an intrinsic part of dancing training. He tells us why.

*by Ross Hannaford on August 11, 2020*



914 SHARES

Growing up, I was a profoundly keen teenager who had firmly set my sights on becoming the best dancer I could be: technically proficient, with accurate lines, an excellent understanding of style, music, anatomy, diet, all of the things.

My dance school had a strict policy of no students being allowed to attend any classes outside of their school. But most Wednesday nights, I would break the rules and take part in my favourite Jazz class. It was a class for professionals and although I was probably too young, I was in awe of the teacher and knew it was

where I wanted to be. I loved the energy and rigour of the dancers and was enamoured with their talent and individuality. Towards the end of the class, the teacher called my name out which was a complete surprise to me and equally terrifying. She said “there has to be something more than that, there has to be something more than the dancing. What you are doing is great, it’s all correct but I want you to show me something we can’t see”. I, of course, quickly nodded as though I understood. In fact, I spent the next 20 years searching for the true understanding of what she meant.



In writing this, I am reminded of the great Martha Graham who said: “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost.”

I often share her wisdom with students before an opening night or at the end of a year’s work. It is so important to have a dance figurehead, like Martha Graham, who holds story as the hero, always. We have all heard our teachers say “I want you to trust the technique and just dance”, “stop thinking so much and go for it” or as my teacher had said “I want you to show us something we can’t see”. I understood the note, and why it was given to me but I was stumped and incredibly frustrated with how to apply it. I worked harder than ever to ‘get it right’, when really it wasn’t about working hard or getting it right; I needed someone to teach me how to do it.

I returned to the high intensity world of ballet training. However, that class ‘lesson’ never left me and the further I progressed through my career, the more I became aware of the vital link that was missing in my training. If a dancer only imitates, mimics or

reproduces, then what is left to differentiate them from a robot? They are blocking their unique telling of the choreography; a deadening of the vibrations if you will, not only of the dancer's internal world but also the external. What is it that separates dance from the sporting worlds of gymnastics or ice skating? Surely, it is the value we place on the exploration of an idea or the telling of a story.

Dancers are storytellers, whether that be in *Romeo & Juliet*, *Don Quixote* or a more modern themed or experimental piece. Stories are more important than we know; we connect over them, learn about ourselves through them, and we understand one another through them. Stories offer a point of view inwardly from the safety of the outside. I have been teaching in some capacity for 18 years now but more recently I have been teaching full-time. As I continue to learn what it is to be a teacher and discover my point of view, I realise I'm incredibly passionate about the very element that wasn't a part of my dance training: acting.



**Ross Hannaford as Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat in *Cats***

This passion was born out of my great frustration at never being taught this, not specifically anyway. It wasn't until I moved in to music theatre and began serious acting training, that my dance world and acting world began to connect. I challenged myself to discover nuance and range within in each dance expression and to truly connect with the choreography and the meaning behind it. Finally I had the key, one that seemed so obvious now, but had eluded me for so long. Since this discovery, I have made it my mission to not only change the way people perceive dancers' abilities to act, but to also change the way we train them.

Teaching is a wonderful thing; it forces you to define and clearly articulate your learnings and to consider what you want to bring to the medium. Over the past few years, I have begun adapting the acting language as well as various acting processes for both the dance class and dance rehearsal. I am working to integrate the language and create a culture where technical precision and story-telling are equally weighted in value. Surprisingly, I have found that working in this way has many practical benefits.

Many of you may believe that we can't take time out to work on the acting process because the technique training takes too much time. You might be surprised to hear that I would agree with you, which is why I would suggest that the training of technique and story shouldn't be at one another's expense. They should be used to bolster and inform one another. After all, the story won't survive without the technique and the technique won't survive without the story.

During technique classes, I make it a priority to remind students that even within incredibly specific techniques, they can still find creativity and expression in the way they manipulate movement. Creativity and story informs movement qualities and dynamics and brings to life what lives between the counts. This is

where students can escape the monotony of technical training and bring to life their expression and artistry.

Other methods of approaching this work will vary depending on the dance style but some broader ideas are: intermittently changing the front, closing the mirrors off, the use of imagery, focusing on the interpretation of music, or changing the atmosphere by dimming the lights. These small shifts can all be very helpful in developing artistry and awakening the student's curiosity and awareness surrounding their interpretation.

Working this process becomes far more integral when teaching repertoire and conducting rehearsals and this is where I believe a lot of dance training is let down. More often than not, repertoire is established as an extension of the technique with a focus on precision and accuracy. On numerous occasions, I was taught historic and acclaimed ballets with no reference to story at all. The value placed on story telling was very low, which is a real shame and re-enforces the stereotype that dancers don't act. We are creating a culture where the height of someone's leg or the number of pirouettes they achieve is more important than anything else.

One of Australia's most prolific theatre choreographers, Ross Coleman, always said he loved working with actors because they never just danced a step but would rather instinctively interpret it. He hated that there was a "right" and a "wrong" way to dance, and preferred the vitality of an actor's work.



**Ross Hannaford as Paul in *A Chorus Line***

I am not advocating students begin changing choreography or undervalue the importance of technique. I understand that this work must live within the confines of the set steps, in the same way that an actor must play within the correct text of a script. What I would encourage is a healthy reminder of what dance is at its core, reminding all dancers that they are responsible for carrying our stories and conveying great meaning. We must provide a space where students are allowed to explore and discover mood, style, dynamics, quality of movement and instinct. Let us at least begin the conversation about where and how that expression can live within the technique and choreography.

As the lines continue to blur between “movement” and “dance” and the dance theatre genre finds its feet in this country, dancers are increasingly asked to add dialogue or vocalise. So, it is more important than ever that we arm and prepare our dancers for the increasingly versatile world they are entering. I would hope that the next generation of dancers have a wide range of skills and are holistically responsive. Training and preparing our students in this way will undoubtedly open up a wider range of career choices in a medium that is notoriously difficult to make a living in and one that in most cases has an expiration

I know this whole idea may seem radical to some. But to a few, I hope I will be preaching to the converted. I don't have all the answers here. We are going to have to figure this out together. All I want is for us to consider factoring in the ultimate goal which is, to tell all of the wonderfully complex stories of what it is to be human, using all the incredible technical achievements of what it is to be a great dancer.

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**Ross Hannaford is a musical theatre performer, teacher and director, currently teaching at Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts. His career highlights include playing Tobias in *Sweeney Todd* for Victorian Opera, for which he won a Green Room nomination, as well as Paul in *A Chorus Line* and Princeton in *Avenue Q*. He became Resident Director of *Cats International* after playing Skimbleshanks in the most recent Australian tour.**



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