

Next stop, the world

Competing in one of Sydney Eisteddfod's numerous events can lead to anywhere – even a successful career overseas, as countless past participants can attest, writes **Darragh O Keeffe**.



ABOVE: Alexander Campbell. RIGHT: Claudia Dean.

DEAN WENT ON TO BECOME THE YOUNGEST-EVER WINNER OF THE SCHOLARSHIP. FROM THERE SHE MOVED TO LONDON IN 2009 AND STUDIED AT THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL FOR TWO YEARS, AFTER WHICH TIME SHE RECEIVED A CONTRACT WITH THE ROYAL BALLET

As a young teenager, Claudia Dean used to dream about performing in the world's most famous ballets. Five years after participating in the Sydney Eisteddfod, she's now living that dream – as a contract performer with London's Royal Ballet, based in Covent Garden.

Dean says she knew she always wanted to be a professional dancer, but it was the question of how to get there, and when, that she was unsure of.

"When I turned 15, my mother and I found Prudence Bowen Atelier, a ballet coaching school on the Gold Coast," she explains. "I had to live-in during the week, prepare my own meals, and do my school work by correspondence for two years. Miss Bowen suggested I enter the Sydney Eisteddfod to practice my performance skills."

Dean says her coach encouraged her to perform in front of audiences, such as those at the eisteddfod, as it would build her confidence, teach her to cope with nerves and provide expert feedback. "That can only make you better prepared for your future, if this is where you want to go. I was sure this was my future, so I was always prepared, motivated and enthusiastic for the next performance."

Dean recalls the eisteddfod performance vividly. She was up against 143 competitors in the 2008 McDonald's Sydney Eisteddfod Ballet Scholarship.

"I just went out there and performed what Miss Bowen had suggested, the solo being Gamzatti's from *La Bayadere*. I remember getting such a buzz from this one solo I had been preparing for weeks. The feeling will always stay with me and, in that moment, I remember not being able to wipe the smile off my face!"

"I also performed a contemporary piece choreographed for me by Miss Louise DeLeur. It was delicate and lyrical, the opposite to Gamzatti. We wanted to ensure that I showed versatility and had the balance between my two solos; that I wasn't a one trick pony."

Dean went on to become the youngest-ever winner of the scholarship. From there she moved to London in 2009 and studied at The Royal Ballet School for two years, after which time she received a contract with The Royal Ballet. She has performed in all the company's signature productions including *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *Manon* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Recently, she marked her 20th birthday by making her solo debut performing Variation 4 in *Raymonda* Act III.

Like Dean, Alexander Campbell was encouraged to enter the eisteddfod by his teacher. Campbell, who is now a first soloist with The Royal Ballet, won the McDonald's performing arts challenge scholarship in 2002.

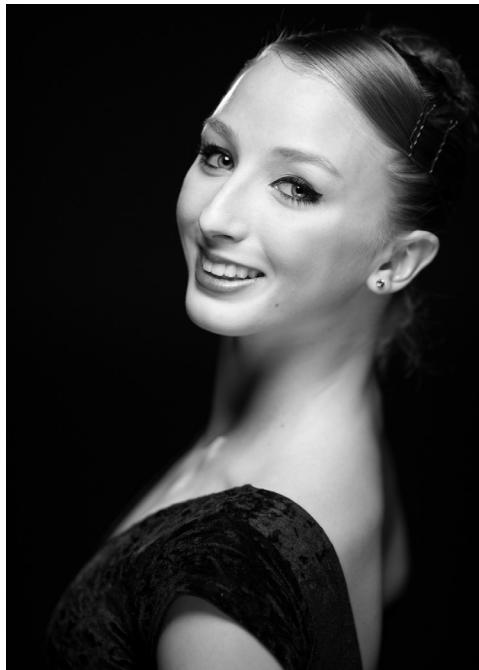
"My ballet teacher, Nicholina Kuner, had a long history with the organisation and her school, Academy Ballet, always entered students in the solo and group categories," Campbell says.

"As students, we were always reminded that the main reason for entering the eisteddfod was for enjoyment. The competitive aspect of the eisteddfod added other pressures and brought different rewards, but the main objective was to enjoy the opportunity to be on a stage and performing something that you had worked hard on preparing."

Campbell entered in a number of solo and group dance categories including Classical Ballet, Contemporary, Demi-Character, Jazz and National Dance.

While the main objective may have been sheer enjoyment, the scholarship Campbell received facilitated his training at The Royal Ballet School. He has since gone on to perform several principal roles, firstly with the Birmingham Royal Ballet, as a Guest Artist with The Australian Ballet, and now with The Royal Ballet, where he is based.

Both Campbell and Dean praise the Sydney Eisteddfod for the unique opportunity it afforded them and the key role it played in their professional development.





Having the opportunity to perform to an audience and get accustomed to being onstage is a huge benefit to any aspiring performer, says Campbell.

"I'm not sure I knew how important the experience I was gaining from the Sydney Eisteddfod was going to be in my career," he says. "Having entered from an early age and having a lot of my friends and fellow students do the same, I thought

For Stuart Skelton, widely acknowledged as one of the finest heldentenors of his generation, winning the McDonald's Operatic Aria in 1993 helped open a door to the world. "As a result, I was able to undertake a two-year Masters Degree in Voice at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, which led me to being accepted into the San Francisco Opera's Adler Fellowship program, where my career started," he says.

Skelton had been entering local eisteddfods for some time, "so it seemed a natural progression, as I matured, to enter the age categories as appropriate and then the McDonald's Operatic Aria competition, as it was then known".

Skelton says he can remember calling his singing teacher, the late Ray McDonald, from a payphone and telling him he had won. "You bloody beauty," came the response. "I'll never forget it," Skelton says.

that every student would have had the same opportunities that we had. Having travelled, studied and worked overseas, I now know that this isn't the case and I am thankful that I was able to have the experiences that I did."

Similarly, Dean describes the Sydney Eisteddfod as "a fantastic platform for up-and-coming artists", adding that she couldn't recommend the competition highly enough.

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"To perform and accept constructive feedback is the first step to becoming a professional, as this prepares you for what lies ahead," she says. "As an artist with The Royal Ballet, I am constantly learning and growing. It's the sort of profession where you are placed in front of an audience to delight them, and I will never forget doing that at the Sydney Opera House."

Dean says the Sydney Eisteddfod experience taught her that anything is possible. If you believe you can do something, it will happen.

"I can proudly say to any young aspiring dancers out there that you should enter competitions for the experience, because you could be just what the judges are looking for. Yes, your technical skills have to be in place, but your personality and drive has to shine through too, and that can make a difference. It didn't matter that I was a little ballet student from Queensland; I suddenly became one of the next hopeful rising dancers to come out of Australia."



Alexander Campbell, first soloist with The Royal Ballet.

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A female dancer in a white tutu is captured in mid-air, performing a high kick. The background is dark, making the dancer stand out.

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