



Rosetta Cook (left) and Michelle Giammichele (right) inspired by their students.

# It's never too late to dance

Two ex-ballerinas have started a dance school aimed entirely at adults, writes **Michelle Dursun**.

A QUIET REVOLUTION is underway in the leafy suburb of Bardon in Brisbane. It is made up of a number of people who are either reconnecting with a past love or realizing a childhood dream that they thought was lost to the vestiges of time. For some it is a new and surprising discovery, while for others it is a life-affirming recognition of a misplaced piece of the puzzle that they hadn't realized was so significant. Regardless, it is a movement which is transforming lives.

The revolution is taking place under the care of 2ballerinas; that is, Rosetta Cook and Michelle Giammichele, former principal dancers at the Queensland Ballet. They have established a ballet school targeted solely to adult learners - one of only a couple in Australia. The success of the school has taken them both by surprise.

The idea for the school formed when they caught up with each other in Brisbane in 2007 over a cup of tea. Giammichele had just returned from living in London and Cook had already moved back home to Brisbane from Sydney. One of the topics that came up was the fact that both were missing dance along with the fitness and focus that it provided. After failing to find a suitable class they took matters into their own hands. "Why don't we get our friends together, hire a hall, and make our own classes? It'll be fun!" they decided. "We placed a small advertisement in a local newspaper and were astounded when 70 people turned up for the first class.

Since that time, the business has taken on a life of its own, attracting an increasing number of students each year. Ages range from 16 and 70+ (both men and women) and classes are held at three different venues. Ballet is the main focus, with classes starting from an Introduction to Ballet for beginners through to Level 5 (Intermediate level). A masterclass for semi-professional and professional dancers is also offered at the Queensland Ballet

Studios at West End. Yoga, Pilates/Ballet Barre, Pointe and Contemporary Dance classes are also offered. Workshops on ballet technique and repertoire have been added recently. "The students in the repertoire class have just learnt a section from Giselle and are now learning all about miming in ballet," Cook says.

2ballerinas now employs 15 teachers, all of whom are ex-professional dancers who have been hand-picked by Giammichele and Cook to promote the values and the ethos of the school. This is perhaps the single most important ingredient in their recipe for success. Both women are proud of being able to offer such a wealth of knowledge and the students are very appreciative. One student who attends eight classes a week and describes her husband as a "ballet widower" comments: "You can't find this calibre of teachers at the one school anywhere in Australia".

IT IS A Thursday evening when I visit the 2ballerina studios and two classes are underway. The first one is the third of a 10-week block of classes for students who have never done ballet before. The class of

26 men and women are completing their plie exercises at the barre. The concentration is all encompassing yet in between each exercise there is happy banter and encouragement between the dancers. Their teacher, Susan Barnes, is measured and encouraging and you cannot help but feel inspired by their conviction and effort. It is a very positive environment which is welcoming to newcomers. "Each new person is welcomed into the fold," one student tells me.

The second class is a Level 3 class, taught by ex-Queensland Ballet dancer Vanessa Mafe, for students who have had some experience. The music is beautiful and the atmosphere is uplifting. As this class finishes, the students for the following class arrive and the buzz and excitement is palpable. They come from all walks of life — there are brokers, doctors, real estate agents, university professors, teachers — even a brain surgeon. Not that any of that matters here. The class is an escape from the real world of deadlines, stresses and concerns. Students are here to share in their love of dance and to forget about their day jobs.

Cook explains that "students have the option of progressing through the levels of classes or can stay in the class they are comfortable with". While there is a strong focus on technique, there is no pressure — only support and a genuine desire to inspire people to "give it a go". It is a very positive experience and students finish the class on quite a high. The two venues (side by side) at Bardon run classes simultaneously, with some students finishing one class and rushing to the adjoining studio for the start of the next class.

Each student has a different story. Some danced for many years before life got in the way and they chose, or were forced, to take a different path. "Many," recounts Giammichele, "tell stories of ballet shoes stashed at the back of cupboards for years, sometimes decades, that they just couldn't bear to throw out." 2ballerinas provides the opportunity to finally put those shoes back on and come to class. For some it is like unlocking a piece of themselves that they thought was long gone. "For those who never had the opportunity to dance — to finally have that chance is priceless," adds Cook.

The benefits run deeper than just the physical — though Cook points out that improved fitness, core strength and stamina are great outcomes. For many students, the opportunity to dance to music provides a sense of expression,

artistry and grace that is hard to replicate through any other activity. As Giammichele states, "You can go to the gym or you can dance. The difference is dancing feeds your soul."

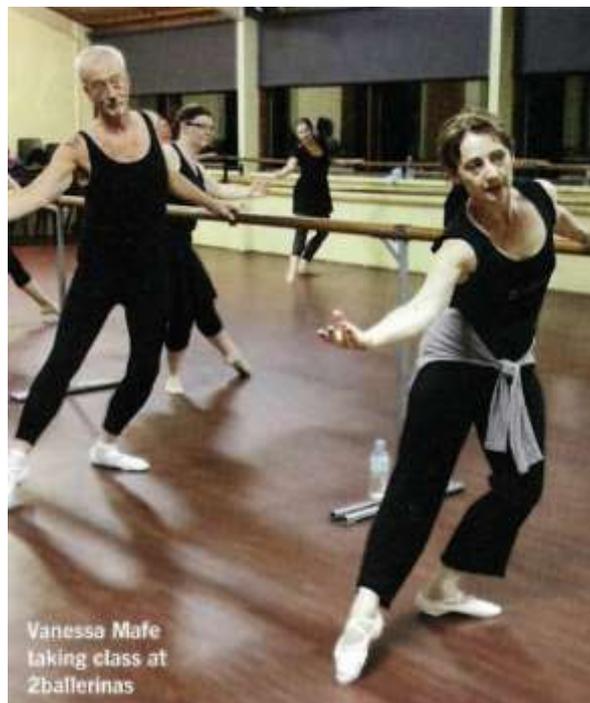
Ballet is also a cerebral activity enhancing the mind-body connection — which ties into the vision of 2ballerinas "creating healthy minds and bodies". There have been many studies into the long-term benefits both to the quality of life and brain function of engaging in right and left brain activities. Studies have also explored the cognitive benefits of both listening to and moving to music. Could it be that 2ballerinas have the key to improved long-term health and wellbeing?

For many students it is the chance to escape real life for an hour or two that is invaluable. As one student states, "I have tried running and swimming for fitness but my mind is still thinking about the dramas and stresses of the day. When I come to ballet, I am totally absorbed body and mind in what I am doing and that is such a wonderful thing. By the second exercise, all my cares have melted away."

*"You can go to the gym or you can dance. The difference is dancing feeds your soul."*

Giammichele and Cook take great pride in the growth of the school but also derive a great sense of satisfaction from the progress the students make. They are inspired by their stories and genuinely impressed by their perseverance and hard work. They note that the sense of community has been a happy and unexpected outcome. Giammichele says many firm friendships have been made and the social aspect of the classes has spilled over to parties, get-togethers and even group bookings for dance performances.

Based on the success of the business, in 2010 Cook and Giammichele were approached by the Queensland Ballet to run adult ballet classes at the company's



Vanessa Mafe taking class at 2ballerinas

studios at West End. This has been a positive partnership with benefits for both, least of which is the creation of a new audience for classical ballet.

While continuing to teach at 2ballerinas, Rosetta Cook is continuing with her film and choreography projects and was recently involved in the development of a dance theatre work, *Heaven Hell and Tango*. Other choreography projects have included a full length work, *The Little Green Road to Fairyland*, with composer Elena Kats Chernin for the Queensland Music Festival, and *Hall of Flame* for the Queensland Ballet. On the film front, Cook's 2011 film *The Last Tango in Sunnybank*, has been screened at the Shorts Film Festival in Adelaide, Agite y Silva in Mexico, Byron Bay Film Festival and at the Bundanoon Tango festival in NSW.

2ballerinas has succeeded in making ballet accessible to all. Giammichele and Cook offer a non-judgmental experience that builds self-esteem and flies in the face of some of the more competitive and elitist notions of dance which students may have experienced in the past. The therapeutic effect is evident. As one student explains: "My work is so hectic and stressful — but I know that if I just get to class, I'll leave in a much better frame of mind than I arrived with."

As the music finishes and the students file out of the studio at the end of the class they seem to be genuinely lit up from the inside. They are testament to the fact that it really is never too late to dance.