

MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

From New Zealand to Gurambilbarra (Townsville): Meet the newest members of Dancenorth Australia

Gurambilbarra (Townsville, Australia) has welcomed two new members to its vibrant arts community: professional dancers Jag Popham and Aleeya McFadyen-Rew, who have recently joined Dancenorth Australia's globally acclaimed Ensemble. These two New Zealand-raised artists bring with them unique experiences, diverse styles and close alignment to Dancenorth's own ethos of connecting to body, nature and community.

Jag Popham, 28

Jag was born and raised in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa (Auckland, New Zealand) and started dancing after what he describes as 'the classic male dancer story'.

"I disappeared one day, I was three, and my parents were like 'Where's Jag!?' he recalls.

"They found me about an hour later wearing my sister's leotard and were like 'Well, we should probably put him into Ballet!'.

"I was a little boy with massive emotions and dance was the way to actually let them out."

Jag trained at South Auckland Ballet Academy from ages 3 to 17 and New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD) in 2014 and 2015. His dynamic style, rooted in both martial arts (capoeira and Brazilian jiu-jitsu) and contemporary dance, makes him a sought-after artist in the Australian contemporary dance scene, having worked with well-respected companies including Australasian Dance Collective and Stephanie Lake Company.

With his feet firmly planted, Jag attributes his success and inspiration to the people and the world around him.

"There's a saying I love which is 'By the honour of my teachers'. If someone says, 'Oh you're amazing, that was great!', it's like 'Yes, but by the honour of my teachers, all of them,' whether they're people, or animals, or the natural world - looking at the ocean or stepping into a river and allowing that to whisper its secrets and tell a story through me."

For Jag, dance is the most authentic and natural form of creativity and self-expression.

“I dance because it’s the most aligned thing,” he says.

“It’s an exploration in this body that we’re all kind of born into and, I believe, it’s my task to research all the different ways that this body can interact with the world. The more I explore what my body can do, the more I find out about the universe.”

Jag joined Dancenorth as a contract dancer on the final leg of the Company’s national *Wayfinder* tour last year before being offered a permanent place in the Ensemble this year.

“It’s my favourite Company,” he says.

“The commitment to the craft that I’ve experienced in my time here is second to none. It’s so beautiful to experience people acting in true servitude of the work and themselves simultaneously. That’s a beautiful balance.

“Dancenorth is not just talking about building community – it is an actual community. It feels like you can run alongside the team, no one’s way out ahead and no one’s dragging their heels. During the *Wayfinder* tour at the end of last year when I was talking with Kyle and Amber about the works they want to make this year and next year, I was like ‘Damn, I want to make those works as well!’

“I’m looking forward to getting further into creative developments and putting shows on stages.”

Beyond creating innovative and world-class choreographic works, Jag is enthusiastic about establishing deep connections within the local community. As a co-facilitator of Dancenorth’s Dancespace classes; classes for young people aged 12-25 in collaboration with headspace Townsville, he is further empowered to share his love of dance with others. “It’s integral,” he says.

“It’s dance with a reason. It’s the healing power of dance and actual community building. It’s being able to share my passion and see that flame fanned in other people. There was this one young guy in the first session who was very cerebral with the intellectualising of dance, and by the end of the second session he was jamming and feeling. The sharing of vulnerable states or places - that’s the medicine I think we all need.”

In addition to making waves in the dance world, Jag is working on his debut album and continuing to develop and present new works with his partner, Bella Hood, through their independent dance company, Kin.

“*Berserk* is coming up on the opening weekend of Horizon Fest. That’ll be rad. We’re doing a double bill with Jenni Large, she’s a force.”

He is also looking forward to exploring the uncharted landscapes of North Queensland and making the most of this new adventure.

“I’m keen to get off into the mountains and do some camping, and proper ‘bush time’. Here in Gurambilbarra, you’re so close to everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, it’s really exciting.

“I’m feeling inspired to keep chipping away at things that excite me, make more work with friends and just dance and feel good. That's what it's about.”

Aleeya McFadyen-Rew, 19

Fresh from New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD), Aleeya has seized the rare opportunity to join a professional company at the beginning of her career.

Born in Thailand and raised in Te Whanganui a Tara, Aotearoa (Wellington, New Zealand), Aleeya was led to dance by two key influences: Barbie and Usher.

“I started dancing when I was three because I really liked *Barbie and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, and Usher’s 2005 Grammy performance,” she says.

“Growing up I dabbled in all sorts of styles; Jazz, Ballet, Hip Hop, Contemporary, and a bit of Tap, but I was most influenced by that very Balletic style and that kind of commercial Hip Hop from the get-go. During my secondary school years, I attended Chilton Ballet Academy, where I focused on Ballet, academics, and a bit of Contemporary, then I went to New Zealand School of Dance (NZSD) and majored in Contemporary from 2022 to 2024.”

Dance is Aleeya’s favourite way to embody life and connect with other people.

“I love the way energy flows through me, the push and pull of momentum, and the physicality of dance. I’m drawn to the depth and diversity of the art form, from structured techniques to raw, expressive improvisation - offering new ways to explore movement. But mostly because I love sharing it with others, simply moving together and creating a connection that words can’t always capture.”

Aleeya's curiosity about Dancenorth was sparked early on, as many of Dancenorth’s current and former Ensemble members have also trained at New Zealand School of Dance, including the Company’s longest-serving Ensemble member Felix Sampson.

“In my third year at NZSD, Felix came back to the school as a guest teacher. He shared his experience of working with Dancenorth, as well as some of the movement methodologies Kyle and Amber teach. We also remounted a work that Amber choreographed for the school a couple of years earlier. I really connected to it all.”

Aleeya attended Dancenorth's annual Secondment Week program in 2024 with Co-Artistic Directors Kyle Page and Amber Haines, along with the Dancenorth Ensemble and 24 other young and emerging dancers.

"I decided that I wanted to look deeper into the Company and applied for the Secondment Program in my third year at NZSD. I got in, came over, loved it, then got asked to come back and loved it even more."

As a result, Aleeya was offered a full-time position as an Ensemble member this year. She describes her experience so far as one of awe and ease.

"I feel like I am allowed to be my authentic true self here, that instead of trying to 'fit' Dancenorth, I can just be myself in Dancenorth."

Grounded and quietly confident, Aleeya is poised to fully embrace the new experiences that lie ahead.

"This is my first time living in a different country. It's going well, it's a lot hotter than New Zealand, a lot more humid, which is really nice but hard to adjust to, coming from windy Wellington! The humidity is a lot, the heat is a lot, but I feel like I'm going to get there. It's going to get to winter and I'll be like 'It's cold as!'

"I'm really looking forward to exploring Gurambilbarra a bit more, the beautiful landscapes and nature, and connecting with the community as well."

Jag, Aleeya and their fellow Dancenorth Ensemble members will be showcasing their original works in *Tomorrow Makers* on 22-24 May. For more information and to book, visit www.dancenorth.com.au/works.

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