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A career en pointe

14 Jun 2018

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Photography:

Video:

As a principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet, Damian Smith was a top talent in a world-leading company. Now he's brought his experience back home to Australia and is drawing on his Indigenous roots to inspire a new generation of dancers – and revitalise Australia's oldest ballet school.

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Acclaimed ballet dancer Damian Smith has jeté across continents, starring in over 200 performances on the world's most prestigious stages. But the Indigenous Australian dancer found his feet growing up in public housing in the New South Wales coastal city of Newcastle.

Smith's father passed away when he was three, leaving his mother to raise him and his five older siblings. He was a sporty kid, involved in soccer, football, athletics and swimming, but when his mother was given two tickets to a local ballet school recital, he "woke up".

"As soon as I saw the show, I knew immediately that's where I belonged," says Smith. "I remember everything: the numbers of our seats and the texture of the material, the music, the choreography."

He began classes at the local ballet school, where he was allowed to study for free, before receiving a scholarship to attend McDonald College, a performing arts school in Sydney. At 16, he successfully auditioned for the School of American Ballet and headed to New York where he studied for two years.

Making a name on the world stage

Over the next five years, Smith studied and danced with ballet companies in France, England and the US. His big break came in 1996 when he requested an audition with San Francisco Ballet, one of the world's leading ballet companies.

Within two years, Smith was promoted to soloist (this can take some dancers up to eight) and three years later to principal – an accomplishment achieved by only a handful of the most talented.

The position brought both rewards and huge challenges – not to mention pain and chronic injury.

"Of course there was the status, which felt great," says Smith. "But with that came a lot of responsibility and expectation. And competitiveness. You feel that you're never good enough.

"I was always in pain but you don't realise how much until it's gone. I have some chronic injuries that I'll have forever. But certainly no regrets. I'd do it all again."

The days of a principal dancer are long and demanding, generally beginning at 9.30am with a warm-up, followed by a ballet class, then rehearsals until the evening, and perhaps some physical therapy. Then it's curtains up, with Smith usually performing seven shows a week.

In his 'spare time', Smith also completed a Liberal Arts degree, and between seasons performed as a guest artist around the world.

How did he manage the pressure?

"I think I was always humble. I felt like I deserved what I had achieved through hard work, but I was always grateful.

"[Ballet] was absolutely everything to me."

Staying connected to his roots also helped keep him grounded – and gave him a point of difference.

"Australians are very well respected [in the US]," he says. "Australians have that hardworking mentality. We have less of a sense of personal entitlement and more camaraderie."

Curtain call

The physical demands of ballet make it a career with a relatively short shelf life, and in 2015 Smith retired at the age of 41 (older, however, than most ballet dancers who retire in their 30s). As a principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet for almost two decades, he had performed in around 150 works across Europe, Asia, the US and Australia.

Realising his creativity stretched beyond the barre, Smith has since co-created several visual art installations and short films, and is about to release a t-shirt line influenced by both his career and his Indigenous heritage.

His first short film, Arrellah (the Aboriginal word for 'dancing ground'), was a tribute to his father and his own Wanaruah identity, in which he painted his body and danced a story onto canvas. It was shown in the San Jose Museum of Modern Art and picked up by several film festivals.

Smith has also taught master classes internationally, and was selected as one of eight for the DeVos Institute's six-month Performers in Transition Arts Management Training Program, delivered in collaboration with Brooklyn Academy of Music. During the course, he took on the role of Artistic Director for the Satellite Collective, a non-profit multi-medium artist collective in New York.

A change of scene

After more than two decades in the US, Smith moved to Melbourne in April 2018, where he has taken a full-time role as Artistic Director with the National Theatre Ballet School. Smith plans to breathe new life into Australia's oldest performing arts school, including introducing Indigenous choreography.

"[The school] has been hidden for many years, it's kind of quiet, so I want to come and light a fire under it. I want to help the theatre be a beacon of art. I'm really excited."

For Smith, teaching is a way to give back to the community and the craft that have allowed him to create an extraordinary life.

“I feel like all the information and all the knowledge that’s been given to me doesn’t belong to me, and it’s my responsibility to pass that on.”

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