

Dancing through lockdown

Keeping dance-fit a challenge for Australian Ballet star

BY MICHELLE SMITH

AUSTRALIAN Ballet senior artist Callum Linnane faced an unusual dilemma in trying to maintain his fitness and dance skills during Melbourne's 2020 COVID lockdowns.

Completing daily ballet lessons live-streamed in to his bayside apartment required a few adjustments from what the ballet teachers were asking for.

"I'm in a 1960s apartment and not that it's small, but it's old. I'm a tall guy so I had to do really low arms or I kept hitting the ceiling," he said. "I learned to keep my arms low, and I couldn't jump in my apartment because the floor felt too old and it would feel like the floor boards under me wouldn't hold, plus I live above an old lady who would probably be traumatised by the sound of a guy jumping above her."

The current circuit-breaker lockdown means the Ballarat born-and-trained dancer is back trying to stay dance-fit for his role in *New York Dialects*, which was due to open at Melbourne's State Theatre on Thursday. The season is up in the air until the outcome of the lockdown is known.

At the same time as hit-

ting the stage in *New York Dialects*, he is preparing for *Anna Karenina* to open on June 18 in which he has a principal role.

Linnane this month celebrated a promotion within the Australian Ballet ranks from soloist to senior artist - the second highest ranking in the company.

It's a long way from the boy who loved every form of dance except ballet when he was a student at Ballarat Centre for Music and the Arts.

"I came to ballet late, when I was 11," he said. "I was at BCMA doing everything but ballet classes, I was terrified of ballet, but once they convinced me to give it a whirl I ended up loving it."

A year later he won a place at the coveted Australian Ballet School. "I came down to Melbourne from when I was 12. It was amazing to walk down the corridor and watch the dancers of the Australian Ballet. I had inspiration at my doorstep."

During last year's lockdowns Linnane was part of an online mentoring program through the Australian Ballet and was matched with aspiring Ballarat dancer Sam Holzberger from his old dance school BCMA. ▀

The pair took part in online sessions across six

weeks. "For me to know I'm playing some small part in a young dancer's journey to fulfil their dream of becoming a professional dancer it's so rewarding to know you are contributing."

"It was nice to get on (Microsoft) Teams with a young dancer in the same situation as you are and for 45 minutes just to be able to work on something, even if it's in the living room or you can't jump, to feel like you are in it together."

The 2020 lockdowns also forced Linnane to explore some of the other sides of his creativity, and other ways to keep fit, given the difficulty he had with dance in his apartment.

"Because I'm a creative person, that creativity is satisfied by what I do for a living and when that was taken away I found myself branching out in to other interests. I was watching more movies, listening to more music, watching plays streamed online and I almost took a step away from dance in a way that it felt like an opportunity to explore other aspects."

"I wrote a little bit, found an interest in photography and I put music on in my apartment and just danced to get my body moving because when you're doing a ballet



CHALLENGE: Ballarat born and trained Australian Ballet dancer Callum Linnane in rehearsals in Adelaide. **Picture:** Kate Longley

class in your apartment and trying to avoid the ceiling, lights and feeling like you could fall through the floor it's pretty disheartening."

It was a big change for someone whose working day is built around physical activity. Normally, Linnane is in the gym doing pilates and strength work at 9am before dancing begins around 10.30. There's a lunch break at 2.30pm, then another three hour block of dance from 3.30pm. He then spends up to another hour in the gym before heading home.

"It's a long day, all physical, but especially at the moment it feels like even though it can be exhausting the more I do in the studio, the more I

back that up with work in the gym and pilates to keep my body in good stead the stronger I feel."

Like all performers, getting back in front of a live audience after a year of lockdown and restricted rehearsals was sweeter than he could have imagined - even if the venue wasn't a traditional Australian Ballet stage.

"After the year we had it was the biggest pleasure just to get out on stage in front of a live audience," he said. "At the end of February we did a gala performance at Margaret Court Arena - so we could get a big number in there and still have social distancing."

"Because it was the first show back there was just a

sense of relief and excitement to be performing once again. It didn't matter where it was, you could have put me on the back of a truck and I would have danced."

Getting back to the Sydney Opera House where the company has just finished a seven week season of *New York Dialects* made the step in to COVID normality feel even more real.

"There was a nice novelty to (Margaret Court) but as soon as we got back in to the Sydney Opera House, as soon as we got back on stage, it felt like home. Nothing compared to being in an actual theatre with an actual curtain, audience, and orchestra."