

Award of Honorary Degree of Doctor of Visual and Performing Arts

Professor Shirley McKechnie

Shirley McKechnie is a pioneer of contemporary dance in Australia and continues to be regarded as a seminal leader and scholar in dance and dance education. Educated for a career in science she chose to pursue an artistic practice over several decades. Her long experience as a choreographer, performer, teacher and artistic director led her to dance scholarship and critical writing and eventually to her recent role as a pioneer in Australian dance research at the Victorian College of the Arts.

Shirley founded the Australian Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1963 and was its Artistic Director until 1973. She subsequently founded the first degree course in dance studies in Australia at Rusden State College (now Deakin University) and was Head of the Dance Program between 1975-1984. With Dame Peggy van Praagh she was a founder of the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance) in 1977.

She played a significant role in the establishment of tertiary courses in dance studies in Australia and was Founding Chair of the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia (TDCA) in 1986. She has served on national and international panels for the advancement of arts education; for symposiums on research in dance and as a consultant to State and Federal government on policies for the arts and arts education.

In 1990 the Australia Council for the Arts funded her to undertake extensive research into the development of choreographers throughout Australia in association with the National Library of Australia. In 1992 she led a delegation of Dance Artists to China for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Her role in advancing understanding and debate about the nature of choreographic creation led to her seminal role in establishing the *Green Mill Dance Project*, an annual festival of dance performance and scholarship funded by the Australia Council and Arts Victoria between 1993 and 1997.

Shirley received the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1987, the Kenneth Myer Medallion for 'outstanding and distinguished achievement in services to the Performing Arts' in 1993 and the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Australian Dance Awards in 2001. At the Victorian College of the Arts she was awarded an Honorary Professorial Fellowship in 1998 and subsequently led a multi-disciplinary research team in two major research projects funded by ARC SPIRT and Linkage grants between 1999 and 2005. These projects were internationally significant – exploring the cognitive and psychological processes involved in choreographic creation and its reception by audiences. Her work energised the creative research climate at the Victorian College of the Arts and at other arts training institutions.

Shirley was a member of the Council of the Victorian College of the Arts from 1973 to 1987. She is an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and continues her role as a dance researcher and mentor to aspiring young artist-scholars in the performing arts.