

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, 13 December 2018, 11.00am

Ms. Stephanie Lake
Director, Stephanie Lake Company

18 years ago I was in your shoes - we didn't have the robes back then. I was a dance graduate filled with optimism, fear, unearned confidence, hutzpah, self doubt and grand visions.

I've been thinking about what I could possibly talk about today that will be useful to you. What can I say that can in any way help you as you cross this most thrilling, hard-earned, frightening of thresholds? I'm no font of wisdom. My dance career has been a wobbly, non-linear journey through crises and victories. But as I reflect on the past 18 years I'm so proud of having carved out a career in this most improbable of fields - a contemporary dancer and choreographer. I've managed to support myself and my family solely as an artist. I've worked all over the world and with astonishingly talented people and have enjoyed some wild successes.

And the foundations were laid right here at VCA. I came to VCA from Tassie - a wide eyed 'worldly' 20 year old, completely lacking in dance technique but big on creativity. I very nearly failed the audition but one of the panel members saw a skerrick of potential in me. I fought to get through the course. I found the repetition torturous, the constant viewing of myself in the mirror troubling, the constraints of the art form frustrating. But I pushed on, I whipped my body into shape, I worked physically harder than I ever have since and I found my creative voice. Friends and I formed a collective and started making shows with no money and with no ambition other than to make dance and have people see it. By the end of 3rd year I was on fire, bursting with ideas and a sense of possibility.

One small opportunity led to two slightly bigger opportunities, led to two more medium sized opportunities and on and on to where I am today. So I say to you, there's no opportunity too small when you're starting out. You never know who is watching. Do the absolute blistering best you can, give it your entire soul and brain every time and new doors will open.

We're in a world that doesn't champion arts and culture as it should. The newspaper has about 20 pages dedicated to sport and cars and real estate and ONE to the Arts. Be the generation that puts arts and culture squarely at the table. Not all of you will be performers or creators. But you all have lived and breathed an arts degree and you are better people for it - you will have that in your DNA for the rest of your lives in whatever field you end up in. Be the champion of the arts, of weirdness, of risk, invention and imagination.

My biggest advice to you is to learn how to deal with the lows, because they will undoubtedly come but they will also go. There will be profound highs, the roller coaster will fly upwards at times and the thrill will be easy to let in, but you will be defined by how you deal with the downtimes, with perceived failures. Learn how to deal with disappointments, with rejection. Missing out. Prepare yourself for the churning, agonising depth of feeling that visits in the creative process. Know that you won't sleep very well, that you'll doubt yourself, you'll think you can't do it. Know that those feelings will pass and keep your eyes forward. Surround yourself with the best people, people who inspire you and push you, people who are better than you.

Understand that the goal posts will keep moving - it's the human condition to want more and more. Let it be the engine that drives you. Keep searching and being curious. For every triumph - tour, award, successful grant application, great review, there will be just as many failures, tough days, financial instabilities, professional jealousies.

But what I say to you today - you have the gift of energy! Youth! You will never have the energy you have now - so harness it! Sure in 20 years you'll have wisdom, experience, depth - but until then - burn bright and bring the light - write, dance, play, make art like crazy. You're unburdened by the weight of expectation, you don't have a back catalogue of past works hovering around and begging comparison, you have the promise of your best work being ahead of you. Get busy! Heal the world, find your people and let them challenge and inspire you, be grateful for the immense privilege of having been able to do an arts degree! Work your ass off in return. And enjoy every minute of your precious life.

Professor Barry Conyngham's Introduction

This morning I am delighted to welcome as guest speaker Stephanie Lake, a multi-award winning Australian choreographer and dancer, and director of the Stephanie Lake Company.

Born in Canada and raised in Tasmania, Stephanie graduated in 1999 from the Victorian College of the Arts with a Bachelor of Dance, and has since collaborated with some of Australia's leading choreographers and performers.

Her major works have toured nationally and internationally in countries including France, Germany and Singapore.

In 2018 Stephanie won the Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography for her work in 'Pile of Bones.'

She is also the recipient of the 2017 Australia Council Fellowship for Dance.

Stephanie has a strong relationship with the VCA, having returned in 2016 to choreograph the dance work Crush. She currently sits on the VCA's Advisory Board.

It is a pleasure to call on her to speak today.

Please welcome Stephanie Lake.