

Vale Shona Dunlop MacTavish (1920 – 2019)



Shona Dunlop MacTavish, born in 1920 in Dunedin, New Zealand, died June 18, 2019, at the age of 99. She made an important contribution to the Christian Dance Fellowship in the early years as a teacher and choreographer at the first CDF Australia conference in 1980 and then at the first International CDF conference in 1991 which was held in Jerusalem.

At the age of 15 in 1935 she sailed with her family to Europe. She stayed and studied expressive dance in Vienna with Madam Gertrud Bodenwieser for two years when Hitler invaded Austria. In 1938 she left with the company to tour Colombia, South America, for a month. It was too dangerous to return to Europe with M. Bodenwieser being Jewish and Shona suggested New Zealand where her family were able to organize a visa for her and her husband. Unfortunately her husband stayed in Paris and ended up dying in a concentration camp. After 10 months touring Colombia they moved to Sydney in 1939 to join other members of the company who had found work there. Bodenwieser established a studio in the city at 210 Pitt St. where later Jacob Bloch, another European Jewish immigrant, set up his famous dance shoe company. She then set up the first modern dance company in Australia, with her repertoire of Vienna waltzes and some major dances on both topical and religious subjects. In one of the longer dances, , Cain and Abel, Shona danced the demanding part of Cain. She danced the lead in other major 'message' ballets such as *O world* as well as a solo choreography on the life of Joan of Arc. When not dancing, she helped Madam Bodenwieser in teaching and also set up a dance school of her own.



Shona in beach shot



Shona dancing as Cain in *Cain and Able*

Shona left the company in 1948 to marry Donald MacTavish, a Canadian Scottish missionary on his way to China. When the Communists took over China in 1949 they had to leave. On their way to a new posting in South Africa they were able to stop in Sydney where they saw Bodenwieser for the last time. Margaret Chapel and Keith Bain, two of the Company's first Australian dancers, set up the *Bodenwieser Dance Studio* on City Road, Chippendale after Bodenwieser died in 1959. In the 1980s dancers from CDFA's Prepare Dance Group and other CDFA members took classes there. At that time the CDFA office was close by in the St Barnabas church building.

Donald had been appointed as Chaplain of Lovedale Missionary Institute which was situated between Grahamstown and East London and had 7 schools operating as part of it. Finding herself in apartheid South Africa, Shona did what she could to fight against the prejudices of that system while bringing up their three small children. She taught classes for African women and children. She found they didn't respond to the discipline of technique but loved spontaneous dance. The Bible classes she taught were transformed when she started using movement to explore the stories. She also started dance classes for the European children and then proceeded to include both African and European children in the same concert – an unheard of event. At their manse all races were welcome.

Tragically Donald died in 1955 after five years at Lovedale. Heartbroken, Shona packed up and returned to New Zealand with her three young children where she started choreographing both sacred and secular dances, opening up a dance studio in 1958 and setting up New Zealand's first contemporary dance company, Dunedin Dance Theatre, in 1963. She became a well-known teacher and choreographer into her 80s when a documentary was made about her life. During those years she travelled extensively teaching dance and lecturing at conferences and theological colleges. She was Visiting Professor of Sacred Dance at Silliman University in the Philippines from 1972-73. She has choreographed over 80 dances and her writing includes *Lord of the Dance*, *Be Jubilant my Feet* (1975), *An Ecstasy of Purpose – the life and Art of Gertrud Bodenwieser* (1987) and *Leap of Faith – my dance through Life* (1997). In 1985, she was awarded an MBE and, in 2002, an honorary Doctor of Literature degree by the University of Otago. Two films were made of her life, *Out Into the Blue* and *Wind Dancer*.

In summarizing her life in dance she wrote: "I have danced in many countries and many strange venues. In bull arenas, hospitals, theatres, prisons, city squares, gypsy caves, vast cathedrals and tiny chapels, at prestigious conferences, with isolated tribal people, and on-board ships. I have danced at Thai Buddhist séances, by the shores of Galilee and the gates of Damascus. I have danced for celebration and I have danced for revolution. As a heroine of mine, Isadora Duncan, declared "A free spirit can live only in a freed body!" I feel sorry for those who have never experienced what the power dance gives to stimulate the body and fire the mind in one act – to draw people of diverse cultures and backgrounds together and to give an insight into the mind of God."

In her autobiography she writes about the *Bible in Dance* seminar organised by the International Theatre Institute in Jerusalem in 1979 where I met her for the first time after previous correspondence and where we both presented papers. CDFA invited her to be guest teacher at our first conference in January 1980. She writes: "The Christian Dance Fellowship movement now operating in almost a dozen countries, owes its existence almost entirely to the drive and enthusiasm of one woman, Mary Jones. Because of the work in religious dance I had begun in New Zealand, I was invited in 1980 to be guest teacher at the first Christian Dance Conference being held at Abbotsleigh Girls' School, Sydney – the same school where I had been assistant to Gertrud Bodenwieser thirty years before. The first National C.D.Conference (she was referring to the international CDFA conference) was held in Bathurst, New South Wales. Membership had greatly increased and Mary, hav-

ing travelled far to promote her vision, had assembled an impressive number of dancers, authors, historians and theologians, even including dancing women pastors. Actors and mime artists also participated. The New Zealand Dance Fellowship was formed on this occasion by Rosalyn Smaill and David Haddy. I found some kindred spirits at these conferences with whom I have continued a warm relationship. (p.223)” Shona was a teacher at this conference where the ICDF was formed and also at the first ICDF conference in Jerusalem in 1991.

Thank you Shona. May you enjoy dancing in worship around the throne.

Shona at 1980 conference at Abbotsleigh school, Sydney



From left to right

Back: Cathy Klemke, SHONA, Mary Jones, Timothy Gordon

Front: Kay Quisenberry, Cheryl Collins.

(from a photograph in “Growth of a Dance Movement” as I can’t find the original)



At the 1991 ICDF conference in Jerusalem – Shona halfway up on right