

Keith Bain (studio shot 1974). All photographs are taken from *Keith Bain on Movement*, edited by Michael Campbell, foreword by Cate Blanchett, published by Currency House

Strictly inspirational

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Marianka Swain reflects on the life of Keith Bain, *Strictly Ballroom* muse and an extraordinary influence on dance and drama in Australia and beyond

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 “My starting point is the human condition, the wonder and potential of the body, our motivations and behaviour, the comedy and tragedy of faults and feelings, the tangle of our emotional inner life, the contradictions of potential and realisation, and the life force that propels us.”

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 • Keith Bain

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Pioneering performer, teacher and choreographer Keith Bain passed away on July 4, 2012. The influence of this exceptionally charismatic man was apparent in the outpouring of tributes from leading industry figures and former colleagues and students, including stars like Baz Luhrmann and Cate Blanchett. “I am a student of Keith,” the latter proclaimed at his memorial service. “Keith’s lessons were life lessons.”

In the foreword to his 2010 book *Keith Bain on Movement*

she wrote: “There is no doubt Keith was and is the biggest single influence on my work as an actor. His teachings are the foundation of my technique.”

Keith’s diverse career included competitive ballroom success, revolutionary movement teaching at Australia’s National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), performances and choreographic work on stage and screen, and an extraordinary contribution to the arts through establishing organisations such as the Australia Council, Ausdance and the International Theatre Institute and uniting talented individuals across different disciplines.

However, his love of movement came from a rather more humble source, explains Anca

Frankenhaeuser, who wrote her thesis on Keith: “He grew up in a small country town in New South Wales and adored watching his parents dancing together at local events.” In his book, Keith recalls seeing his “grounded” barber father lead his mother onto the floor: “Somehow, as if on a breath, their two bodies connected into one new unity as they moved into the figures of the dance in a way that was no longer walking, no longer ordinary.”

Although Keith’s first career choice was schoolteacher, “he instilled in all his pupils an appreciation of the arts,” notes Anca, “and his style of teaching was a performance in itself!”

Aged 27, Keith was struck by the work of the Bodenwieser Dance Group, led by modern dance pioneer Gertrud Bodenwieser, who invited Keith to join her classes after seeing him perform. He became a leading member of her Sydney-based company, dancing with them until her death in 1959, and carried on her work by setting up the Bodenwieser Studio.

In order to fund the project, he trained as a teacher at the Arthur Murray Studio, ➤

Keith on ballroom

“Competition so easily leads to mere show-anything to catch the judge’s eye. But when I see this style danced with beautifully concealed technique, with restrained and sensitive styling, in empathy with the music, making a new unity of the bodies of the two dancers [and creating] movement that only true partnership can produce, I know why it was worth the time and effort to master its difficult techniques and how much pride and pleasure it has always given me.”

From Keith Bain on Movement

“We couldn’t help but move differently from the standardised international style... Our work became contentious and notorious. It threatened the beliefs and techniques of those who had devoted their whole lives to their traditional style”

• Keith Bain



Above, from left to right: Keith Bain with dance partner, Joyce Lofts, in the 1950s; in the studio in 1974; teaching at NIDA in 1986 (Photograph by Stuart Campbell, from the NIDA Archive)

and thus began his love affair with ballroom. By the early 1960s he and partner Joyce Lofts had become Australian Ballroom Exhibition and Latin-American champions – but not without drama along the way.

“We couldn’t help but move differently from the standardised international style,” explains Keith, noting that his exposure to the raw Bodenwieser aesthetic gave him a very different approach. He stresses that he wasn’t critical of other dancers, but of “the body stylings and conventions of dressing, musical interpretation and dance figures promoted by the rival associations who organised the medal systems

and competitions. Our work became contentious and notorious. It threatened the beliefs and techniques of those who had devoted their whole lives to their traditional style.”

He says their titles were extremely hard won, as they competed not just against other dancers, but against the establishment. “I don’t regret the battle and I can understand how, in 1984, a clever group of NIDA students saw the thematic potential for theatre and film.”

Strictly Ballroom was born out of a class project in which “Glenn Keenan, the boy who could really dance, and Baz

[Luhmann], who thought he could, and some others decided they would like to do something about my ballroom dancing.” Keith shared his experiences and the result was a short play that became the toast of a Czechoslovakian drama festival – “the audiences went wild, seeing it as a call to action against Soviet and communist authorities”.

Baz then staged a longer version before developing the film. The project has come full circle, with the new musical stage production of *Strictly Ballroom* premiering in Sydney next year.

In 1959, Keith was invited by Doris Fitton to teach actors at the Independent Theatre. Unsure how to go about it, he grilled his actor brother and his friends, noting their reliance on theories and discussion rather than “the physical revelation of an inner life”. Director John Alden offered more blunt advice: “If you can teach any actor in this country to take three steps and stop, I’ll be delighted.” Keith experimented by asking untrained friends to follow simple instructions and quickly learned

Keith’s teaching tips

- Don’t over-explain. Guide students to their own realisations and solutions
- Balance technical work with creative and structure with exploration
- Maintain a sense of humour and even some wildness, allowing students to feel physically free
- Encourage students’ self-image and belief in their own potential as creative artists
- Appreciate the diversity of physical expression, but also how similar we are in so many of the ways we express ourselves

Julia Cotton



Above, from left to right: Catherine McClements and Baz Luhmann in *Strictly Ballroom* (first incarnation) at NIDA, 1984; Keith Bain and Coralie Hinkley in *Central Australian Suite, A Child is Born* (ABC TV 1957), choreographed by Gertrud Bodenwieser; the International Theatre Institute Dance Committee, with Keith second left, on stage at the Bolshoi Theatre after the gala performance in honour of Yuri Grigorovich, January 11, 1987

that movement that doesn’t arise “from one’s own impulses, needs and states of feeling is not easy to make one’s own, nor give off a sense of spontaneity in doing it”.

Keith developed an entirely new way of working, drawing movement out of his students rather than imposing it on them: “The basis of my teaching was helping an actor become the best version of himself first, then developing the capacity to represent every other kind of human being.” He didn’t scare actors by throwing technique at them, notes Anca: “His skill was in leading them to places they never thought they could go, all by engaging with something inside themselves.”

She loved Keith’s creative instructions, “like ‘Turn on your headlights’, meaning be open to receiving and giving energy, or ‘Find your best height’, rather than ‘Stand up straight’. Richard Roxburgh says that every time he glimpses his reflection in a shop window, he’ll think of Keith and stand at his best height.”

Julia Cotton, who assisted Keith and succeeded him as head of movement when he retired after 40 years of teaching at NIDA, adds: “He had a remarkable ability to make students feel they could do anything and that their individual qualities were precious. So many have gone on to grace world stages and screens, their unique talents readily observed through a physical language they learned from Keith.”

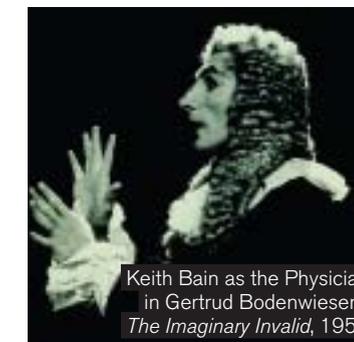
Keith’s own work extended to dance groups, television, musicals, theatre and opera. At his book launch, critic Katharine Brisbane apologised for not crediting him in productions she’d reviewed; it was only when she read his book that she realised the extent of his contribution.

Keith also brought practitioners of diverse styles together for the Dancers’ Picnic, a day of food, drink, performance and informal prize-giving; the event grew into the Australian Dance Awards. “He felt dancers weren’t properly acknowledged for their work,” explains Anca. “But more than that, he genuinely loved discovering

new forms of movement and celebrating collaboration.”

“Above all, Keith was a truly great teacher – that’s rare,” says Baz. “He not only taught you and you learned, he taught you how to learn and to never stop learning. Keith has left an indelible mark and he’s with me every day in my creative journey. His story lives on through his students, and their students, and people they tell stories to, forever and ever.” ●

Keith Bain on Movement, edited by Michael Campbell, is published by Currency House, hardback £43 (www.currencyhouse.org.au).



Keith Bain as the Physician in Gertrud Bodenwieser’s *The Imaginary Invalid*, 1950