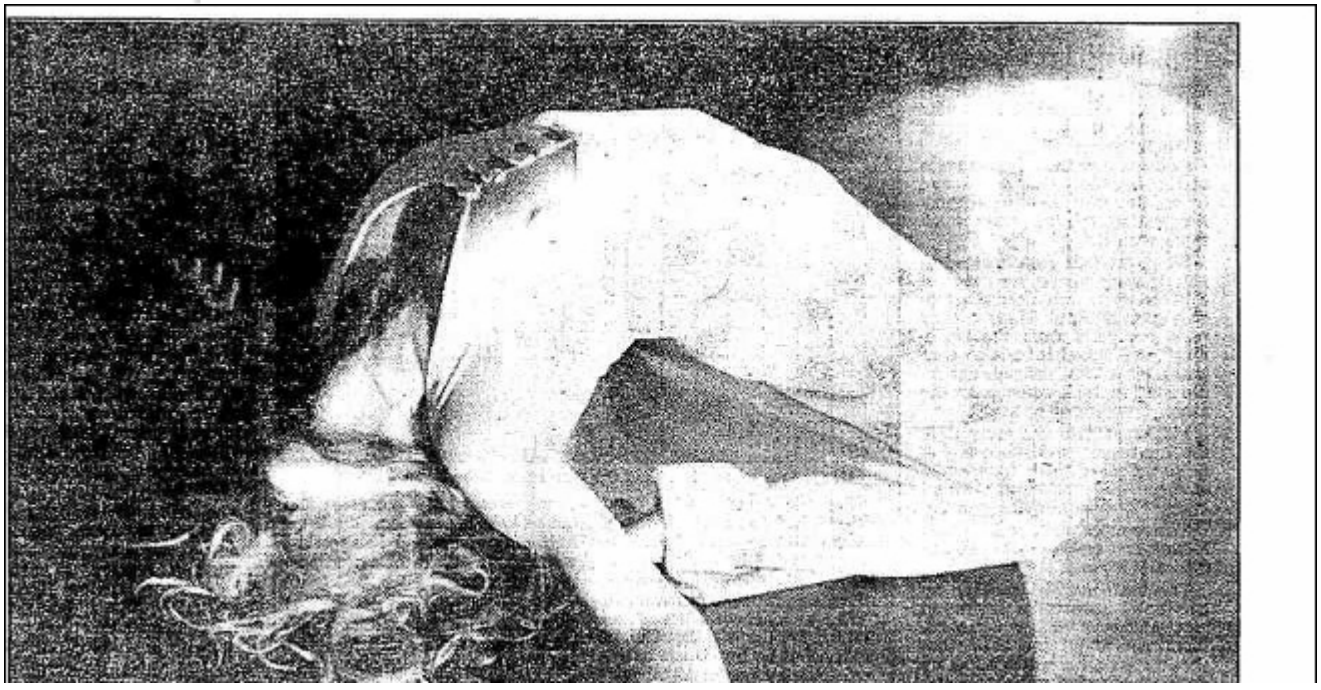
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Picture: BILL FEGAN

Down to earth high fliers

By RACHEL HILL

SYDNEY'S budding stars can set their sights on NIDA and their Victorian counterparts have the Victorian College of Arts to strive for. But once again Canberra gets left out in the cold.

The absence of a regular training base for local artists has prompted Splinters theatre group to devise an ongoing program of workshops to meet the need.

Although the project is still in its early stages, the coordinator of the initiative, Catherine Hassall, hopes the small seed will grow into something big.

"It might not be comparable to NIDA yet," Hassall whispered, "but that's the goal we're looking towards".

In addition to providing training for performers, The National School For Performance Investigation, as it is called, has also been established to provide employment for tutors in a wide range of disciplines.

Hassall said the initiative offered professionals an opportunity to expand their training and non-performers a place to begin.

She hoped it would raise the profile of, and generate further, experimental performances and street theatre.

"Judging on how well the buskers festival went we would all benefit from having colour and vibrancy added to Canberra's grey architecture," she said.

"It can only help the arts scene to have people making an effort to take it out there."

As a basis for the program Hassall will conduct tri-weekly training sessions aimed at building a high level of performance fitness for participants.

These Virtual Flight sessions are aimed at conditioning the body using techniques ranging from yoga to the Japanese dance form Butoh.

Hassall believes we do not reach our potential and that if we put our minds to it we could virtually fly.

"Our ultimate potential is flight so the sessions are aimed at overcoming the blocks and transcending," she said.

"I think if everyone said humanity could fly we probably would, but the name of the sessions is also a metaphor for reaching our potential."

On both a professional and personal level Hassall has developed her own potential through the practice of Butoh.

As a dancer who had her sights set on becoming a prima ballerina, an injury at the age of 17 was a cruel blow to Hassall. But it also marked a turning point in her career, forcing her to rethink the direction classical dance was leading her and consequently she decided it no longer suited her.

"I found classical dancing didn't suit me because I was trying to do things with the body that were coming from an external shaping rather than an internal desire," she said.

"In ballet the body has to do certain moves because that's what it has to look like. With Butoh you're expressing yourself so you can do anything to express that internal impulse and it comes much more from your artistic soul."

Butoh originated in Japan during the turbulent '60s and is considered among the

Butoh originated in Japan during the turbulent '60s and is considered among the major developments in contemporary dance in the latter half of the 20th century.

The Japanese signing of a treaty to allow the installation of American nuclear bases during this time created a great deal of uproar and sparked off the creation of the new dance.

Butoh, or dance of darkness, inspired new forms of movement and expression. Rather than aspiring to aesthetic ideals dancers bared their souls exposing the banality, grotesqueness, sufferings and joys of life. It was a rebellion against Japan's traditional dance in the same way contemporary dance broke away from classical in the west.

The dance has only been acknowledged in the west in the past 10 years and even more recently in Japan.

World reknowned Butoh teacher Cheryl Heazlewood said it was a shame that new creations had to be accepted outside their country of origin before they were recognised.

Heazlewood said the early dances focused on the conflict that war and westernisation of Japan had brought to its culture.

Like many new forms of expression Butoh was born out of suffering and had organically grown since.

She found it difficult to explain in words a passion that she usually expressed with her body.

"Butoh is very connected to the ground. The energy from the dance comes from the earth whereas in classical dance everything is reaching from the heaven," she said.

"It works on a series of exercises and techniques that teach people to get in contact with their self and the emotions. It involves a lot of physical stretching and has a strong yoga influence.

"It's about discovering a new way of working that can be related to dance, theatre or any aspect of your life because once you contact the source it's very difficult to leave behind after two hours in the studio," she said.

Although it helped people contact aspects of themselves not usually dealt with such as death, birth, ugliness and pain, it could also be extremely funny and erotic.

"Japanese are quite extraordinary people. They read erotic comic books on the metro and while they're having coffee," she said.

There had been few changes in the dance world for quite some time and as most changes had previously come from Europe and America it was about time eastern

changes had previously come from Europe and America it was about time eastern philosophy infiltrated the west.

Heazlewood will conduct a one-week class on Butoh from May 1 to 5 as the first in the series of workshops by Splinters.

One of the program's underlying aims is to keep the cost of the classes at a minimum. For further information contact 240 7200.