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## **Sara Neil - First Director of the New Zealand School of Dance**

Sara Neil, Wellington ballet dancer and the first director of the New Zealand School of Dance, died on 9 January 2011 in the UK at the age of 78.

Sara Neil, who grew up in Wellington as Doreen Brown, completed her early ballet training in New Zealand under Phyllis Oliver and Dorothy Daniels. She went on to study at the Royal Ballet School in London, then performed and toured with the Royal Ballet Theatre Company and Sadlers Wells Theatre Ballet.

Sara was a technically excellent dancer and developed a witty personality in her dancing. She emerged as a soloist of note, performing in Kenneth MacMillan's 'Solitaire' for Sadlers Wells Theatre Ballet in 1956. The great choreographer created a polka solo for Sara who 'seized the limelight' in the quirky role. Sara returned to Wellington, where she set up a dance studio with her husband Walter Trevor, also a dancer. She danced in the first major national tour of the New Zealand Ballet Co. (now the Royal New Zealand Ballet) in 1960.

In 1967, Sara became director of the newly formed National School of Ballet, now the New Zealand School of Dance. The first home of the School was the Empire Theatre, the former cinema in Marion Street. It began with nine full time and four part time students.

The New Zealand School of Dance, now with around sixty studying full time, prepares its students to excel in careers as professional dancers. Recognised as one of the Southern Hemisphere's leading dance institutions, the School has trained many significant figures in the dance world. At present around a third of the dancers in the Royal New Zealand Ballet are graduates of the School. Others are dancing with companies such as West Australian Ballet, Australian Dance Theatre, National Theatre Ballet of Prague, Royal Danish Ballet, Singapore Dance Theatre and Black Grace Dance Company.

Sara Neil continued an influential career in ballet. Returning to the UK she taught at White Lodge, the lower school of the Royal Ballet School, and was director of the Hammond School in Chester.

Reference: Jann Parry, *Different Drummer, the Life of Kenneth MacMillan*, 2009