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South Australian dancer and director, Jianna Georgiou, has taken out one of state's most prestigious annual awards in the arts.

Jianna lives with Down syndrome and is a NDIS participant.

She won this year's Frank Ford Memorial Young Achiever Award at the State's premier Ruby Awards, which honour the best of South Australia's arts and culture sector.

Jianna dances professionally with Adelaide's award-winning Restless Dance Theatre, and has performed interstate and internationally, winning accolades since she began dancing at age 14.

"I would like to thank the Ruby Awards and Arts SA, this was a big surprise," said Jianna, who was delightfully surprised when her name was announced.

"I would also like to thank Restless Dance Theatre and all my directors and tutors."

The NDIS supports Jianna's professional career as a dancer. Jianna's NDIS plan includes funding to attend Restless Dance company training.

It also provides Jianna with a support worker, transport assistance, occupational therapy and psychotherapy, all of which help her in her career.

"I would like to say how proud we are of Jianna and that she could never have achieved such an amazing accolade without Restless Dance Theatre and the NDIS," said Jianna's father George Georgiou.

The Frank Ford Memorial Award recognises outstanding artistic or cultural achievement or contribution by a young South Australian.

Jianna accepted the award at a COVID-safe event at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), attended by the Premier of South Australia Steven Marshall.

"I was very surprised and happy, I couldn't believe I had won!," Jianna told her parents later.

During COVID, Jianna spent several months training with Restless Dance on Zoom, and when restrictions eased, she performed for live audiences in Seeing Through Darkness at AGSA throughout October.

"Jianna has a fantastic quality on stage that really draws you in," says Restless Dance Artistic Director Michelle Ryan. "It's been really fabulous to see her growth as an artist, especially in the past couple of years."

Jianna says that having Down syndrome means she sometimes finds it tough to communicate.

“It’s hard for me to communicate with other people and it’s hard for me to get along with other people with disability,” she said. “It can be very confusing. It can be difficult to be friends with people and hard to keep friendships.”

Jianna may sometimes struggle to find the right words or to understand others, but when she steps on to a stage and starts moving to music, her body speaks a language all of its own.

“I’m very relaxed and comfortable on stage,” she says. “I feel happy and I am definitely confident when I am dancing.”

Jianna has rehearsed and performed internationally with Restless in the United Kingdom and South Korea, performed with several highly acclaimed productions interstate, collaborated on an award-winning film, and directed several works herself.

Jianna’s parents, George and Pat Georgiou say NDIS support provides Jianna with a meaningful and challenging career, which she loves, and also helps her maintain physical and mental health.

“We are incredibly grateful, we could never afford to give Jianna everything she needs without the support of the NDIS,” says George.

“We just hope she can continue doing what she loves for as long as she is enjoying it.”

Jianna feels the same, and is anxiously awaiting an end to the global pandemic.

“I would like to do more performing, more directing, more travelling around the world, “ says Jianna. “I’m waiting for COVID to end.”

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