



Australia Dances

Creating Australian Dance 1945–1965

A sepia-toned photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a dirt path leading towards a large, leafy tree. The background shows a cloudy sky. The overall tone is historical and artistic.

Australia

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Dances



ALAN BRISSENDEN AND KEITH GLENNON



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For two Australian Giselles
Laurel Martyn and Dorothy Stevenson
and in memory of
Keith Glennon



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Introduction



The two decades following the Second World War were a period of astonishing vitality and originality for dance in Australia stimulated particularly, but not only, by dancers of Colonel de Basil Ballets Russes touring companies in the 1930s who had remained or returned here to teach and, in some cases, later to establish companies. Earlier visitors had also been influential, if in different ways. Although Diaghilev's Russian ballet which captured Europe in 1909 did not travel so far, it was only a few years later, in 1913, that the first classical ballet company arrived, presented by J.C. Williamson and led by the Danish ballerina Adeline Genée and Alexander Volinine. Except for this visit, Australia lacked the inspiration which great dancers such as Karsavina and Nijinsky, and the Diaghilev ballets as a whole, brought to the Western world between 1909 and 1929.

When such artists did eventually appear their impact was as great as it had been elsewhere. Anna Pavlova was the first to come, in 1926 and again in 1929. Neither her company nor her repertoire was remarkable but her own dancing made a profound impression. Following these tours teachers increasingly sought more knowledge of classical technique. Enthusiasm continued to grow as the Dandré-Levitoff company led by Spessivtseva and Vilzak (1934) and de Basil's Ballets Russes made their extraordinarily influential visits (1936–1937, 1938–1939, 1939–1940). They left memories of brilliant performances and splendid repertoires, partly inherited from Diaghilev, and a legacy of technique, both in the classes that had been given by some of their members and in those dancers who stayed in Australia and became teachers. Modern dance teaching, which had begun in Melbourne in the 1920s, also became firmly established, particularly after Gertrud Bodenwieser and members of her company settled in Sydney in 1939.

Previous page: Anna Pavlova and Aubrey Hitchens in Pavlova's *Autumn Leaves*, in which a chrysanthemum, tenderly nurtured by a poet, is ruthlessly killed by the north wind. The ballet was included in the Pavlova company's 1926 Australian tour. Photograph: Van Riel.

Right: Algeranoff (Algernon Harcourt Essex), a member of Pavlova's company who was to have a long and influential association with ballet in Australia.



The 1930s were indeed crucial for the development of dance in Australia. The European systems of classical ballet training which had recently been codified in England were adopted and led to greater teaching proficiency. The tuition was often academic but teachers of general theatrical dancing enlivened it, and dancers who settled in Australia supplemented it with their special experience. By the 1930s, most of the thousands of students learning to dance found expressive outlet in school recitals, examinations and eisteddfods. But as well, after about 1930, groups based on studios began to present complete ballets, many of them original, some of them reproductions of classics. By the 1950s amateur and semi-professional groups had emerged in each state.

The first professional companies were pioneered by the immigrant dancers. In Sydney Helene Kirsova, supported by private means and with a policy of originality, gave her first season in 1941; her company continued until 1945. In Melbourne Edouard Borovansky's company became professional in 1944 and under the management of J.C. Williamson Theatres Limited followed a policy of producing the classics, the ballets of the Russian companies and some original works. The company continued intermittently until Borovansky's death in 1959. The National Theatre Ballet Company, based like Borovansky's in Melbourne, made its first tour in 1949 under the artistic direction of Joyce Graeme, a soloist with the Ballet Rambert which had toured Australia in 1947–1948. Though short-lived as a professional touring organisation, the National Theatre Ballet Company appeared in each state and made known on a national level the work of Australian choreographers Joanne Priest and Rex Reid and composer James Penberthy. In association with the New South Wales division of the Arts Council of Australia this company staged Rex Reid's *Corroboree* to John Antill's music in 1950. Bodenwieser's Australian modern dance company made its first overseas tour in 1947.

Neither the large professional companies that toured nationally nor the smaller regional groups had any hope of permanence when there were no reserve funds to support them between seasons. Continuity was maintained only by those organisations and teacher-producers whose schools provided a measure of productive work, either amateur or semi-professional. From the first beginnings of Australian commercial ballet, artists like Kirsova had urged the necessity of assured aid, and the problems of companies between 1940 and 1960 gave dancers, audiences and administrators alike their own experience of this need.

Official assistance on a large scale began in 1961, when the Australian Ballet Foundation and the Australian Ballet were established. This company, the direct heir of the Borovansky Ballet and the first to be nationally subsidised, made its first appearance on 2 November 1962 under the artistic direction of Peggy van Praagh at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney. By the end of its first decade it had performed in all capital cities, visited many country centres and made five overseas tours.

The Australian Ballet Foundation, the corporate entity behind the company, was not a government institution, being set up through a partnership between J.C. Williamson Theatres Limited and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. It received financial aid from official sources, in 1961 through the Trust, a body set up to commemorate the Royal visit of 1954 by promoting theatre arts in Australia, and later through the Australia Council, established in 1968 as the Australian Council for

Helene Kirsova, prima ballerina of the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet (1936–1937) and founder of Australia's first professional ballet company.



the Arts. The Trust's action in 1961 was of enormous importance: until then its funds, initially acquired by private donation and grants from commonwealth, state and local governments, had been used to support opera and drama, but not dance.

Some state assistance had previously been given to local groups – a small annual allowance to Ballet Guild and occasional grants to the National Theatre Ballet Company by the Victorian government, for instance, and promotion of small companies for regional tours by the Arts Council of Australia and the adult education bodies of certain states. Following the endowment of the Australian Ballet Foundation, however, several state governments began or increased financial aid to dance organisations. In 1966 the West Australian government more than matched a Trust grant to the West Australian Ballet Company with an allowance of \$3000 and doubled the amount within three years; the Victorian government's grant to Ballet Guild in 1969 was \$5000; but the Queensland government's action was the most telling: it made a grant of \$7500 to the Queensland Ballet Company in 1967 and then raised this to \$30,000 within two years. In 1965, Australian Dance Theatre was founded in Adelaide by Elizabeth Dalman and Leslie White and in 1969 it became the first modern company to receive government subsidy, a grant of \$5000 from the Australian Council for the Arts.

The situation at the time of writing is remarkably different. Funding from both federal and state government bodies support dance companies, independent artists and dance organisations throughout the nation, as well as the Australian Ballet and the Australian Ballet School, which was established in 1964 with Margaret Scott as its first director. Support is also given to the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance Inc.), the national advocacy body, which began life as the Australian Association for Dance Education in 1977. With a national office in Canberra and branches in each mainland state and territory, Ausdance provides a voice for dance through advocacy, partnerships with institutions such as the National Library of Australia and the Australian Institute of Sport, research, conferences and publications such as *Brolga*, *Dance Forum* and *Asia Pacific Channels*. It assists dance education and performance, and presents events such as the Australian Dance Awards and the Australian Youth Dance Festival.

Much talent and sound enterprise has nevertheless been frustrated and lost for want of support and stimulus. The country's dance is a totality, and there is still scope for the development of a national perspective to evaluate and more liberal means to foster contributions to the whole, a perspective based on a greater understanding of the values of dance to individual and social life.

These values include but go far beyond entertainment. Dance requires and therefore aids the integration of body and mind, exercising both in relation to the environment. Ideally, it inculcates order and harmony, discipline and control. It can convey nuances of experience beyond the range of speech. It employs our innate understanding of movement, a universal language too largely ignored in Western society. Through its close connection with music, design, literature, and especially drama, dance can lead to a greater awareness of the other arts. Its relationship with ethnology can lead to a greater historical awareness and a closer understanding of other peoples. Above all, its practice is a stimulus for living. For these reasons alone dance should be studied and encouraged – and encouraged from the national level.

During the period covered by this book there was considerable achievement but it was largely concerned with establishing dance as a form of theatre. More needed to be done if that achievement was

to be considered Australian in terms of style and content as well as performers. Organisations with this ideal, notably Ballet Guild and Ballet Australia, produced work of vitality and distinction; but the effectiveness of their approach was often limited by their financial resources. There needed to be enough aid for study and experiment, for investigating the potential for works presenting the individuality of Australian life, as painting and writing, for example, already did. Support of this kind did arrive, particularly during the 1970s, from the federal government, and especially through the Australian Council for the Arts and its successor the Australia Council, and as state governments began to set up departments for the arts. Among the more spectacular manifestations of such support was the founding in 1989 of Bangarra Dance Theatre. This developed from the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, the part-time performance group which in 1976 had grown from the work being done by the Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Scheme, itself established only the year before.

Awareness of the place dance can have in general education grew slowly, and is still growing, fostered in part by lecture-demonstrations to many thousands of schoolchildren by groups from the Australian Ballet and regional companies. The study of dance, in its various forms – from classical to rap and everything in between – can lead to a greater balance of physical and intellectual functions, to a fuller appreciation of theatre and to the restoration of dance as a natural partner of music, speech and drama in the expressive life of the individual and the community. Small beginnings were made. In 1967, for example, the Australian Ballet School's course was approved by the Commonwealth Office of Education for inclusion in the Technical and Secondary Scholarships Scheme – a recognition of dancing as a skilled occupation. In New South Wales, dance could be taken as part of the physical education courses at Fort Street Girls' High School and Sydney Teachers' College. Forty years later, dance could be taken as a subject in many secondary schools throughout the country and ten tertiary institutions, all but two of these offering degree courses.

In bringing together accounts of so many different ventures, it is hoped that this book will share in building an awareness of a community of interests, stimulate the interchange of ideas, and provide a record of the exciting period when so much creativity was energising Australian dance. In whatever ways dance continues to develop here there will be need for a continuing literature. *Australia Dances* had the initial purpose of surveying dance in this country from 1945 to 1965, but in some cases the time limit has necessarily been made more flexible. It was not intended that every single work produced over that time should be recorded – a near-impossible task. The book has been planned with sections on each of the major companies, with descriptions of a selection of their repertoires, on the main activities in each state and on the most relevant organisations. Wherever possible, accounts have been written from firsthand experience but programmes and other materials have, of course, been consulted. In this connection the various public libraries and the many people connected with dance treated the grateful authors with warm generosity.



The Borovansky Ballet



The Borovansky Ballet grew from the school founded in Melbourne by Edouard and Xenia Borovansky, two dancers who appeared with Colonel de Basil's Covent Garden Russian Ballet which visited Australia in 1938–1939. Presented by J.C. Williamson Theatres Limited and, after 1951, the Education in Music and Dramatic Arts Society, the Borovansky company toured Australia and New Zealand frequently between 1943 and 1960 and made classical ballet an important part of theatrical entertainment in these countries.

The first public performance by members of the studio was given under the auspices of the National Theatre Movement in Melbourne in July 1939, when Borovansky's *Petite Mozartiana* was among the items presented during two evenings of ballet. This drawing-room scene choreographed to music by Mozart was a slighter work than *Autumn Leaves*, the group's first full-scale production, performed in November 1940, again for the National Theatre Movement. Rachel Cameron, Serge Bousloff and Borovansky himself danced the leading roles in the ballet, which was originally in the repertoire of the Pavlova company of which Borovansky had been a member. Among the ballets choreographed for studio recitals (as distinct from public performances) were *Pas Classique*, *Vltava*, an interpretation of Smetana's music, and *L'Amour Ridicule*, a comic ballet arranged to music by Spanish composers. Both this and *Vltava* were included in the repertoire of the professional company formed in 1943.

As well as these performances, the group gave recitals for the Melbourne Ballet Club, which built a stage in the Borovansky studio. Evening performances were given at weekends and a number of original works were produced. Among the choreographers were Laurel Martyn and Dorothy

Stevenson, both of whom had had training and theatrical experience overseas.

After this period of workshop activity what was to become the first professional Borovansky company was formed under the name the Borovansky Australian Ballet. Like de Basil's companies which excited Australia during the 1930s, Borovansky's had various titles, sometimes even differing between the covers and the insides of programmes and brochures. The Borovansky Ballet of 40, for instance, made a farewell tour of New Zealand in 1944–1945; the Borovansky Australian Ballet appeared at His Majesty's Theatre Melbourne in May 1946; in 1951 it was the Borovansky Jubilee Ballet that had a gala opening on 6 April at Sydney's Empire Theatre. The brochure for the Theatre Royal Adelaide season beginning 11 June 1954 had Borovansky Ballet on the cover and The Borovansky Australian Ballet inside; programmes for the 1955 Perth season had Borovansky Australian Ballet on the cover and The 1955 Borovansky Ballet inside. But it was as the Borovansky Australian Ballet that the first company commenced a season of one week at His Majesty's Theatre Melbourne on 13 April 1943, presented by J.C. Williamson Theatres Limited. Principals included Dorothy Stevenson, Laurel Martyn and Edna Busse and Borovansky, Serge Bousloff and Martin Rubinstein. This initial season had marked success and after a second from 12 November to 8 December at the Comedy Theatre the company commenced its first Australian tour. This began on 20 May 1944 at Adelaide's Theatre Royal, and for the first time the dancers were given contracts and received a weekly salary.

Previous page: Edouard Borovansky as Pierrot in the de Basil production of *Le Carnaval*. c. 1938.

Below: A studio portrait of Dorothy Stevenson as Giselle, her finest dramatic role. Borovansky Ballet. Photograph: Noël Rubie.



The repertoire had a strong core of classics, including *Swan Lake* (Act 2), *Giselle* and *Coppélia* (two-act version) but an important place was given to original works, some of which had developed from ballets produced on a small scale in the studio. *Sigrid* and *En Saga*, both by Laurel Martyn, had been previously presented in Melbourne and London; Dorothy Stevenson's *Sea Legend*, however, with music by Esther Rofe and decor by Alan McCulloch, was the first ballet to be produced by Australian-born artists for a professional company. Its theme was Man's fascination with the sea; the story concerned a youth who falls in love with a Sea Maiden, loses her when she is reclaimed by the ocean and, in trying to follow her, is engulfed by the waves. This ballet was successfully produced for the International Ballet in London in February 1948.



Esther Rofe also wrote the music for *Terra Australis*, Borovansky's first work to have an Australian theme – the struggle between an explorer and an Aboriginal for the possession of Australia, represented by a young girl. The book was by Tom Rothfield and the decor by William Constable, who was to have a long association with the company as a designer. *Terra Australis* was produced during the second tour, in 1946.

During 1948 the company provided the ballet for J.C. Williamson's production of *The Dancing Years* and *Gay Rosalinda* and was then disbanded, as it was following every Commonwealth tour. The lack of continuity, a regrettable feature of the company's life, interrupted the progress of its dancers and hindered the development of an artistic unity and style. Whereas the great ballet companies of the world have achieved distinction through continuity and security, the Borovansky Ballet was hampered by its need to be assembled on an ad hoc basis. At the conclusion of each tour the dancers either found other employment or, if possible, went abroad to join other companies.

When the next Borovansky company was formed in 1951 a number of dancers returned to Australia. Kathleen Gorham had danced with the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, Dorothy Stevenson had been associated with the International Ballet, Peggy Sager and Paul Hammond had appeared with the Metropolitan Ballet, and at the Glyndebourne Opera, where Mr Hammond had been ballet master and in the 1948 British film, *The Red Shoes*. Edna Busse, who had received all her training at the Borovansky studio, rejoined the company, which was also strengthened by the appearance of Charles Boyd and Miro Zloch, both of whom had visited Australia with the Ballet Rambert, and a Belgian dancer, Paul Grinwis. Kurt Herweg was engaged as musical director and Dudley Simpson as deputy conductor and pianist.

The 1951 season, which opened at the Empire (later Her Majesty's) Theatre, Sydney on 6 April, was received with extraordinary enthusiasm. The first programme included *Les Sylphides*, *Petrouchka* and *Le Beau Danube*. After a stay of three months in Sydney the company continued its tour of the Australian capital cities and for the first time visited New Zealand. Original ballets produced during the season were *The Black Swan* and *The Outlaw* by Borovansky, Dorothy Stevenson's *Chiaroscuro* and *Les Amants Eternels* by Paul Grinwis. A reproduction of *The Sleeping Princess* by Miro Zloch added to

Royes Fernandez as Albrecht, Jocelyn Vollmar as Giselle and Eve King as an imperious Myrthe, Queen of the Wili, in *Giselle* Act 2. Borovansky Ballet. Photograph: Walter Stringer, 1955.

Le Beau Danube, with Strelsa Heckelman as the First Hand and Borovansky in his highly acclaimed role as the Strong Man, which he created at the ballet's premiere in Monte Carlo in 1933. Borovansky Ballet. Photograph: Jean Stewart, 1946.





Above: Kathleen Gorham, when dancing with the Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas in Paris in 1953. Photograph: Serge Lido.

Right: Edna Busse, the first fully Australian-trained dancer to become a principal. Borovansky Ballet. Photograph: Peter Fox.

