



## NEW LIGHT ON THE BALLETS RUSSES

### *The Hugh P. Hall Photographic Collection*

Lee Christofis tells of a recent, stunning acquisition

Something remarkable happened last year when the Australian Ballet's music director and chief conductor, Nicolette Fraillon, heard of the existence of a large collection of Ballets Russes photographs taken almost 70 years earlier by a Melbourne solicitor, Hugh P. Hall. They comprised 1182 images of Colonel Wassily de Basil's companies photographed during their 1938–1940 Melbourne performances. Some of these images had been reproduced in Hall's much coveted 1948 book, *Ballet in Australia: From Pavlova to Rambert*—a rare collector's item by any criterion.

Hugh P. Hall was an artist in an artistic family; his mother was a gifted pianist, while his paternal aunts painted, carved and also enjoyed making music. A bright student at Caulfield Grammar, at the age of 16 Hall progressed to the University of Melbourne,

and Law. His ambition though, was to be a painter, and on completing legal studies, he enrolled at the National Gallery School. His father's early death precipitated him into taking on business and family responsibilities however, and photography came to replace painting as his chosen aesthetic outlet.

As his book so lyrically reveals, Hall's passion for the art of the legendary Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova was the source of his continuing fascination with dance, and when Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes company made three tours to Australia between 1936 and 1940, Hall had found a much broader scope of productions to canvass. Twenty-eight ballets were performed, many of them being among the most exotic and brilliant works of the 20th century. (After the final tour, Hall might have expected to be short on photographic subject matter, but the emergence of the Borovansky Ballet in Melbourne and the Kirsova Ballet in Sydney, followed by the 18-month tour of London's Ballet Rambert (1947–48) provided yet further fruitful opportunities.)

Hugh P. Hall (1899–1967)  
*Irina Baronova and Paul Petroff as  
Passion (centre back) and Artists  
of the Company, in Les Présages.*  
Covent Garden Russian Ballet,  
Australian Tour, His Majesty's  
Theatre, Melbourne, April 1939  
b&w photograph; 19.7 x 24.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3915126



Hugh P. Hall (1899–1967)  
above, from left:

*H. Algeranoff as Fate and Irina Baronova as Passion (centre), Paul Petroff as Passion (right), and Artists of the Company, in Les Présages. Covent Garden Russian Ballet, Australian Tour, His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, April 1939*  
b&w photograph  
19.8 x 24.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3915122

*Tamara Grigorieva as Action, in Les Présages. (Details as above.)*  
b&w photograph  
19.7 x 24.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3915107

*Irina Baronova as Passion, Tatiana Riabouchinska as Frivolity, Tamara Grigorieva as Action (front centre), Paul Petroff as the Hero and Artists of the Company, in Les Présages. (Details as above.)*  
b&w photograph  
19.3 x 24.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3915137

Hall's published Ballets Russes pictures, and many, many more, surfaced in 2005, at a National Trust exhibition held at the opulent National Trust house Labassa, in Caulfield (Victoria)—and were thus brought to the Australian Ballet's attention. A subsequent appointment was made for Nicolette Fraillon to visit Mr Hall's daughter, Mrs Felicitie Campbell, to view the pictures at Glen Moore, her Elsternwick home (and Hall's home from his birth in 1899 until his death in 1967). The treasure trove awaiting Nicolette was astonishing: seemingly countless images of 28 Ballets Russes productions mounted on large panels of packing cardboard. They were almost entirely in sequence: photographed as the ballets unfolded on the stage.

These images were not posed 'glamour' shots, but a wonderfully dynamic series documenting the greatest outbreak of balletomania Australia had ever seen. At the time, people had queued overnight in serried rows around city streets to purchase tickets. The Ballets Russes was an unprecedented performance phenomenon in this country, not matched until the arrival of the Beatles three decades later.

The photographs' existence is as much testament to Hall's skill in capturing the body in motion as it is to de Basil's allowing Hall to photograph his productions. He offered Hall a pair of aisle seats in the dress circle of His Majesty's Theatre to attend as many

performances as he could, on condition that Hall held an exhibition of the photographs, and if possible showed them during the Ballets Russes 1938 round-Australia tour. Two very successful exhibitions were held (the Library holds copies of the catalogues), and the public proved keen to purchase Hall's images of their favourite ballets and artists.

Recognising the historical significance of Hall's images, Nicolette Fraillon contacted colleagues at the National Library regarding acquisition of the entire collection. Happily, within a few months of their National Trust outing, the images were headed for the Library's Pictures Collection. As soon as they entered the building, Michael Proud (who had arranged their acquisition) called me to help unpack them. My Ballets Russes Project research colleagues Richard Stone and John Thomson leapt at the opportunity to join in, on what proved an exhilarating task.

Nothing which Nicolette or Michael had said could have prepared us for the shock of unpacking so many layers of ballet history within just a few minutes. Here were 1182 images, more than a thousand of them unpublished, spilling over every panel. They expanded in number like film strips, or film-makers' story boards—*Le Coq d'Or*, *Petrouchka*, *Schéhéhazade*, *The Firebird*, *Graduation Ball*, *Icare*, *Les Sylphides*, *Cotillon* and 20 more productions. It was unimaginable seeing them all together, and so many of them at once.



Even before the pictures had been preserved and catalogued, they were put to immediate use in helping the Australian Ballet prepare for the staging of its 2007 *Destiny* season. This is a tribute to the famous Russian choreographer Leonide Massine, notably to his first symphonic ballet, *Les Présages*, of 1933. Danced to Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*, this production had been wildly contentious with music purists and critics at the time. Wendy Walker, the company's current ballet mistress entrusted with the preparation of this ballet's revival, was promptly invited to look at the photographs to derive ideas for her work over the ensuing months. The National Film and Sound Archive was also contacted, for access to another treasure trove—the Ballets Russes film archive of the 1938–40 tours, shot by two doctors, Joseph Ringland Anderson and Ewan Murray-Will.

Prior to viewing Hall's photographs, Wendy Walker and I watched three short films of *Les Présages* at the Archive: observing the scope and style of the movement, how the original dancers performed the ballet, and how different dancers interpreted the roles. Viewing the film before looking at Hall's still shots allowed Wendy time to absorb the detail of each dancer's role, the poses or groupings, and to note how each sequence fitted into the patterns and architecture of the choreography.

It was an emotionally exhausting day, filled with excitement, delight and bursts

of laughter. Conversation flowed around how Wendy might use phrases and motifs from the ballet to teach today's dancers the 'plastique' or sculptural flow of Massine's innovative movement; and on how today's ballet technique would need to accommodate Massine's athletic, body-torquing combinations. The dancers would have to find a new centre of gravity, to move as swiftly as the de Basil dancers without losing equilibrium and control. Subsequently, aided by recent videos of the ballet and a detailed notation score, Wendy worked with the Australian Ballet dancers before the setting and final polishing was done by Mme Tatiana Lesvoka, a former de Basil company dancer who had worked closely with Massine, and has staged *Les Présages* and other ballets by him around the world.

The managing and cataloguing of the entire Hall collection proved a mammoth undertaking (see accompanying box, page 7). There were some entertaining moments. For instance, Steven Jones, a university student employed to assist in identifying the dancers and to write the captions, at first found it almost impossible to distinguish some lead dancers from other members of the corps. Make-up and wigs confounded matters, but Emma Sekules, a curatorial assistant in the Library's Music and Dance branch, became his best accomplice—matching jaw-lines, ears, noses and smiles, and noting how different

right:  
Wendy Walker of the Australian Ballet views the Hugh P. Hall acquisition  
(Photograph by Richard Stone)

below:  
Loui Sesejja (b.1948)  
Steven Jones, Emma Sekules  
and John Thomson identifying photographs

dancers held their heads in certain ballets. From this Steven developed a 'rogues gallery' of multiple images of the dancers to assist in recognition. His gallery became a favourite drop-in spot for colleagues and visitors to the office.

The research generated by the Hugh P. Hall Collection is invaluable to the Library and to the Ballets Russes project. Like an archaeologist's find of shards and broken columns, it is helping us piece together previously unconnected details around each of the Ballets Russes tours: to verify casting and programming, to assess the aesthetic significance of each ballet, and to reconstruct the sense of surprise and astonishment which some of these ballets generated over the length of the Australian tours.

From historical and publishing perspectives, the photographs allow us to fill the stories of these tours with real people—not just unidentified support dancers backing the well-known leading artists such as Irina Baronova, David Lichine, Anton Dolin and Tatiana Riabouchinska. We can also relate these pictures to articles, reviews, biographies, and to the Library's oral history interviews with Kira Bousloff, Helene Kirsova, Tamara Tchinarova, Valrene Tweedie and Kiril Vassilkovsky, who each played a significant role in establishing the ballet profession in Australia. The images connect too, to Anna Volkova, who returned to live here after World War II, and who just last year assisted in restaging *Les Sylphides* for the Australian Ballet's *Revolutions* program.



In addition to its intrinsic beauty and story-telling, the Hugh P. Hall collection constitutes a grand archive, and a necessary reference point for the many other Ballets Russes images which the Library has collected over the years by way of donations and acquisitions of artists and balletomanes' collections, scrapbooks and albums. When the last stage of processing is completed—the digitisation of these images to the Library's Pictures Collection and the internet—the Library will be able to introduce the legendary Ballets Russes and this marvellous collection and memory-bank to people all round the globe.

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The Australian Ballet's *Destiny* season is playing 30 August – 10 September 2007 at the Arts Centre, State Theatre, Melbourne, and 7 – 26 November at the Opera Theatre, Sydney Opera House.

The Ballets Russes website can be accessed at [www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses](http://www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses)

## PROCESSING THE HUGH P. HALL COLLECTION

John Thomson, *Ballets Russes Project researcher, National Library*

When the Hugh P. Hall photographs arrived at the Library last December, a careful strategy was developed for the conservation and processing of such a large collection. All of the photographs were still mounted on the large, folded sheets of thick cardboard originally used by Hall to display them. There were 47 sheets of two, three or sometimes four folded panels measuring approximately 91 cm square when folded.

Over Christmas 2006, the whole collection was snap-frozen to -20°C to kill any silverfish or other insects that may have been in the cardboard. (There was some evidence of silverfish damage on a few of the photographs.) Then, for conservation, storage and access reasons, it was decided to remove the photographs from the board. Because the position of each photograph on the cardboard as originally set out was important information that should not be destroyed, a photographic record of each panel was made, capturing the whole sheet opened out, as well as the back.

Hall had individually numbered each photograph on the front, and a table was devised to record the number of the photograph, and its position, so that the original sequence could be reconstructed. A conversation in May 2007 with Hall's daughter, Felicitie Campbell, revealed that the pictures should be read from top to bottom, from left to right, column by column. This information assisted in relocating some photographs which had come adrift from their cards. Mrs Campbell also advised that some hitherto unexplained pencilled crosses on the photographs had been made by Colonel de Basil to indicate the photographs which he wanted reproduced. (Not surprisingly, these cross-marks had not pleased Hugh Hall.)

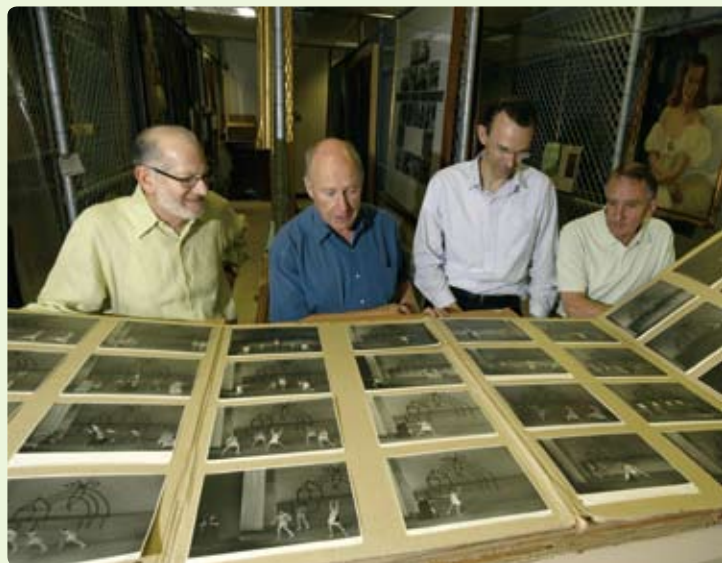
Most of the photographs were still attached by the original adhesive photo corners. They were carefully removed using a modified dental spatula, and dust was removed using a micro-fibre cloth. A few photographs required extra conservation treatment, to remove glue and remnants of adhesive tape. Each photograph was then

given a unique accession number, placed in an archival sleeve, and stored in an album.

Once the physical processing was completed, the captioning began.

This was a complex task, because apart from knowing the name of the ballet and (usually) the year, from the back of the original cardboard sheet, there was no other identification. Nor was there a record of exactly which performance or performances Hall had photographed. Knowing the year of the performance and knowing that all the photographs had been taken in Melbourne, did narrow down the possible number of performances. Cast lists held in the Library's PROMPT (Australian Performing Arts) Collection, which had been digitised, were used to ascertain which dancers danced which roles. Complications arose however where more than one dancer danced a role, or when it was not clear which role was which. Hall's book, *Ballet in Australia: From Pavlova to Rambert* (1948), as well as photographs and portraits in programs and existing photographs held in the Library's collection, all provided clues. Valrene Tweedie, a former Ballets Russes dancer, assisted with identification of some of the most difficult cases.

With the captioning finished, the six-month processing task is now completed. The captions will have been converted into catalogue records, and in coming months all the photographs will be digitised for viewing through the National Library's catalogue, Picture Australia, and the Ballets Russes website.



Loui Seselja (b.1948)  
(left to right): Lee Christofis,  
John Thomson, Michael Proud and  
Richard Stone view the Hugh P. Hall  
photographs