

'BALLET ARRIVED ALL SERENE'

Cabling Ballet History



schedules, publicity and other matters were argued and agreed upon. This process was predominantly conducted by telegraph cable in the days before universal electronic communication, and when international telephone calls were expensive and cumbersome. The surviving cables assume an even greater importance due to the absence of a significant body of business and financial records in the major J.C. Williamson collections. (In addition to the

left:
The seven bound volumes of cablegrams from the J.C. Williamson Collection
Manuscripts Collection
MS 5783

below:
Managing Directors of J.C. Williamson Ltd—J.H. Tait, E.J. Tait, F.S. Tait and J. Nevin Tait reproduced from *J.C. Williamson Ltd. Magazine* (Sydney: City Ads Ltd, c.1937)
Ephemera Collection

Richard Stone explores the history of the Ballets Russes tours to Australasia through old telegrams held in the Manuscripts Collection

The J.C. Williamson Ltd collection within the National Library's Manuscripts Collection (MSS 5783 and 9145) contains thousands of telegraph cables pasted into seven large ledgers. In chronological order, covering a period of 44 years from 1928 to 1972, the cables were sent between the Australian headquarters of J.C. Williamson Ltd and J.&N. Tait Ltd and their London and New York offices.

The overseas offices were crucial to the Tait and Williamson organisations. Their core business was importing performers and shows from Europe and America, the Tait brothers with concert artists, and Williamson importing the latest musicals, dramatic shows, opera and ballet companies. The fact that the family of Tait brothers was intimately involved in both organisations was a convenient and powerful factor. The cables constitute a major source of information on the operation of two major Australian theatrical organisations.

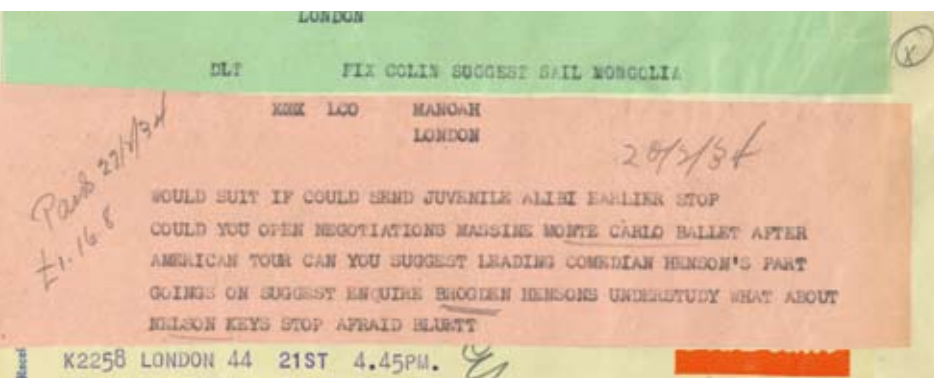
Bringing a performing company to Australia meant a long, complex negotiation process during which details of repertoire, casts, profit sharing, fares, fees, performance

National Library, there are holdings in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, and the Performing Arts Collection in Melbourne.)

The business records that exist are fragmentary for the 1920s and 1930s—a fact which has become even more evident through current research being undertaken for the National Library's Ballets Russes in Australasia Project. 2006 marked the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the first of three companies collectively known as the Ballets Russes, which toured Australia and New Zealand between 1936 and 1940. (2009 will mark the centenary of the sensational debut of Diaghilev's ballet company in Paris.) The Ballets Russes companies formed in the 1930s were successors to the Diaghilev tradition. The Ballets Russes in Australasia Project (a joint venture between the Library, the Australian Ballet, and the Elder Conservatorium of Music at the University of Adelaide) was formed to mark this extended anniversary period. Its aim is to research the nature of the Ballets Russes tours, their impact and legacy.

The Australasian tours were jointly managed by Colonel Wassily de Basil and J.C. Williamson Ltd. The de Basil





'Could you open negotiations ...'
 This attempt to bring a Russian
 ballet to Australia in February
 1934 proved unsuccessful
 J.C. Williamson collection
 Manuscripts Collection
 MS 5783

organisation had bases in London, New York,
 or wherever de Basil happened to be. So far
 no substantial de Basil archives have been
 found either here or overseas. Consequently,
 the story of the Ballets Russes companies
 in Australasia is embedded in the story of
 J.C. Williamson Ltd, making the surviving
 Williamson archives particularly important.

Cables reveal that as early as 1933 Nevin
 Tait, in London, alerted his colleagues to
 companies in Europe reviving the Diaghilev
 traditions. On 6 March 1933 he cabled:
 'RUSSIAN BALLET PERFORMING MONTECARLO
 WITH MASSINE SECURABLE SHALL I
 NEGOTIATE.' A positive response came from
 Melbourne, but after investigation Tait
 cabled back: 'ADVISE RUSSIAN BALLET AFRAID
 FINANCIALLY IMPOSSIBLE.' They tried again
 unsuccessfully in February 1934. While
 these cables reveal the previously unknown
 possibility of an earlier Ballets Russes tour
 to Australasia, their brevity also leaves
 the researcher dangling with tantalising
 questions—Why was the ballet 'financially
 impossible' at that time?

Attempts to lure a Russian ballet
 company to Australasia should be seen in
 the context of other attractions considered
 by Williamson and Tait. During 1935,
 for example, cables record unsuccessful
 negotiations for a Russian opera company,
 for Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence
 in *Tonight at 8.30*, for a Shakespearean
 company headed by John Gielgud, for the
 Markova–Dolin ballet company, and for
 a Russian Cossack troupe. On the latter,
 the Australian office bluntly cabled back
 (15/2/1936): 'COSSACKS LOST HEAVILY LAST
 TIME UNINTERESTED.'

On 12 February 1936, Nevin Tait again
 suggested a Russian ballet company:
 'ALTERNATIVE IS MONTE CARLO BALLET
 ENQUIRING SAME.' His enquiries yielded a
 substantial proposition four months later

(18/6/36): 'BASIL MONTECARLO FORMED
 SECOND COMPANY SAME BALLETS COSTUMES
 SCENERY EIGHT PRINCIPALS ABOUT THIRTY SIX
 DANCERS SELECTED FROM EXISTING COMPANY
 AND ALHAMBRA REQUIRES GUARANTEE
 EIGHT HUNDRED WEEKLY ACCOUNT FIFTY
 PERCENT FARES COULD OPEN SEPTEMBER OR
 APRIL ALTERNATIVELY DOLIN COMPANY APRIL
 SIX HUNDRED WEEKLY BUT WANTS HIGHER
 PERCENTAGE CONSIDER FORMER MORE
 IMPORTANT PRINCIPALS BIGGER REPERTOIRE
 INCLUDING SPECTACULAR SCHEHERAZADE
 MANY NEW BALLETS.'

For the next four months constant cable
 traffic dealt with offers and counter-offers
 about repertoire and casting, shipping
 schedules, season dates, fares, advance
 payments, profit shares, copyright problems,
 orchestral requirements, and practical
 considerations about the preferred stage
 surface. London replied to this latter
 query (2/9/36): 'IF FLOORS BAD LINOLEUM
 UNPOLISHED DESIRABLE.'

The company left London on board the
 SS *Moldavia* in August 1936, but the cables
 continued between London and Australia,
 refining the details. As the company
 passed through Fremantle, the Williamson
 management in Australia confidently
 cabled (8/10/36): 'ADELAIDE BOOKING TWO
 THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED CAPACITY SEASON
 CERTAIN.' Two days later, the Monte Carlo
 Russian Ballet arrived in Adelaide and a
 relieved cable went to London: 'BALLET
 ARRIVED ALL SERENE.'

The opening season in Adelaide was
 a great success, and capacity audiences
 continued during the triumphant tour.
 However, it was only a week before
 'serenity' evaporated. On 17 October Nevin
 Tait received a blast from Australia: 'THEIR
 MANAGEMENT ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE
 OBSTRUCTING EVERY REASONABLE EFFORT
 CRYING BITTERLY REGARDING PLAYING
 SCHEHERAZADE EIGHT PERFORMANCES ONE
 WEEK GREATEST DIFFICULTIES OBTAINING
 PROGRAMMES DECOR VERY UNSATISFACTORY.'
 A stream of cables shows that problems
 of working with the Ballet's management
 continued for some months. In the
 meantime, the only other ballet cables
 which continued to be sent were reports on
 box office takings. These are an invaluable
 source of financial information. One of the
 last cables (19/7/37), sent at the end of
 the tour, succinctly expressed satisfaction:

'BALLET ADELAIDE 2800.' (That is, £2800 for week's takings.)

Such was the financial success and popularity of the first Ballets Russes company that J.C. Williamson Ltd quickly pursued a second tour, negotiations starting almost as the first company sailed away. The pattern set by the cable negotiations for the first tour is repeated for the second company, the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, which toured Australasia from September 1938 to April 1939. However, the extent of the cables is affected by the major changes within the management of J.C. Williamson Ltd, when a majority of share holdings in the firm passed to a New Zealand syndicate. Although the Tait's were still involved, there was a dramatic decline in the number of cables passing between Australia and London or New York, and hence there's a loss of detail and information.

By mid-1939, however, the flow of cables resumed, with negotiations for the third company. As usual, much cable space was occupied by questions of repertoire and casts. For example, Irina Baronova, who was a very popular, glamorous star in the second tour, withdrew from the company to pursue a career in Hollywood. This caused the Tait brothers much heartache: 'GREATLY CONCERNED ANNOUNCEMENT BARONOVA LEAVING COMPANY ... ABSENCE WILL GREATLY PREJUDICE RECEIPTS' (28/7/39). Cables show that the situation was retrieved, however, by promoting the equally glamorous Tamara Toumanova as a star of the third tour.

As 1939 advanced, the cables reflect the worsening international situation. The process of assembling a large company and transporting them to Australia became problematic due to increasing restrictions on shipping and difficult immigration matters. At least 10 nationalities were represented in the company, as well as several people who were Nansen or stateless people. One group of dancers travelled from France to Australia via the United States. Reaching New York, some were detained as aliens on Ellis Island, until a frantic exchange of cables secured permit documents and they were cleared for the train trip to Los Angeles and a ship to Australia. Other members of the third company came via the Suez. The separate arrivals in Sydney of two shiploads of dancers within hours of each other brought forth a sigh of relief from the Sydney office



(28/12/39): 'BALLET ARRIVED WORKING ENTHUSIASTICALLY SOLD OUT FOR PREMIERE PROSPECTS SPLENDID NEW YEARS GREETINGS TED TAIT.'

Based on J.C. Williamson's successful experience with de Basil's companies, these positive sentiments from Ted Tait were well founded, and the third company generally lived up to expectations. However, by the end of the eight-month tour, wartime restrictions were taking their toll and the cost of moving a large company around had proved expensive. One result was the cancellation of a tour to New Zealand. Theatre takings also began to show a decline (11/6/40): 'BUSINESS BAD FORTNIGHT GILBERTS 2800 BALLET 3750.' (That is, two week's takings for the Gilbert & Sullivan season £2800; Ballet season £3750.)

Australia farewellled the third de Basil company in September 1940. The dazzling era of Ballets Russes companies touring Australasia had finished. Yet the colourful story of that era is being pieced together today, thanks to sources such as the humble telegraph cable. The cables document the decision making involved in the tours, the practical problems of their complex organisation, and the management difficulties. Cryptic and terse they may be, but the cables present a vivid sense of the business of show business.

RICHARD STONE is a research assistant on the Ballets Russes in Australasia Project, based in the National Library. His book, *Fragments of the Everyday: A Book of Australian Ephemera*, was published by the National Library in 2005



above left:
Unknown photographer
Tamara Toumanova, Original Ballet Russe Tour to Australia, 1939-40
gelatin silver photograph
17.4 x 13.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3427898

above right:
Russell Roberts Pty Ltd
Helene Kirsova and E.J. Tait c.1940
gelatin silver photograph
24.9 x 19.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3080604

below:
Edouard Borovansky (1902-1959)
Portrait of Wassily de Basil c.1938
pen and ink drawing; 24.0 x 15.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7722548

