

Diaghilev's Legacy



Lee Christofis previews the *Ballets Russes in Australia* symposium being held in Adelaide in two months time

In May, at the University of Adelaide's Elder Conservatorium, a symposium will draw together a number of national and international dance artists and specialists to share insights about the collaborative creative projects that generated the repertoire for Col. Wassily de Basil's Ballets Russes. The company performed in Australia under four different names in as many years, from 1936 to 1940.

Celebrating the tours and their impact on Australian culture, this symposium, unprecedented in Australia, arises out of the Australian Research Council-funded project, *Our Cultural Revolution: The Ballets Russes in Australia*, in which the National Library is jointly engaged with The Australian

Ballet and the University of Adelaide. The symposium will begin at the beginning of Les Ballets Russes—19 May 1909, and the premiere of Serge Diaghilev's revolutionary company.

In the introduction to his book, *Speaking of Diaghilev*, the late, influential BBC arts and music producer John Drummond wrote of his quest to discover the complex man behind the legend of the Russian impresario. Diaghilev was, Drummond argued, the most extraordinary example of 'a new kind of artistic leader. Not always a performer, but always someone of knowledge, wide experience, taste and vision.' He bracketed Diaghilev with the influential theatre directors V.E. Meyerhold in Moscow, Florenz Ziegfeld in New York, Max Reinhardt in Vienna, and Australian-born theatre manager, Oswald Stoll in London. In the short years between 1909 and 1914, Diaghilev had radicalised and determined the creative ethos of twentieth-century ballet: a crucible of collaborative experimentation

Daryl Lindsay (1890–1976)
Reproduction of work depicting dancers of the Borovansky Ballet rehearsing for *Pas classique* at the Elizabeth Street studio, Melbourne, 1939
b&w photograph
13.6 x 18.0 cm
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms8495-23-1-s3-a1



above:
Gordon Anthony (1902–1989)
Portrait of Léonide Massine
c.1938
b&w photograph
20.4 x 14.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3391546

below:
Hugh P. Hall
Borislav Runanine as the Head Mistress (far right), and Artists of the Company, in 'Graduation Ball', The Original Ballet Russe, Australian Tour, His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 1940
b&w photograph
19.7 x 24.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4174676

which—in accord with Wagner's theory of opera as a total integration of music, text and design—would make ballet a medium in which dance, music, decors and costume were equal.

The endless fascination for this era continues to spawn wide-ranging scholarship, literature, films and biography as we approach in 2009 the centenary of Diaghilev's first Paris season. While nothing could replicate the scope of Diaghilev's achievements, the cluster of companies that emerged soon after his death (trouncing prognostications that, with his death, ballet too would die) has also become the focus of major studies across the world. In Australia, between 1936 and 1940, as in Europe and the Americas until 1962, the second wave of Russian companies directed by impresarios Col. Wassily de Basil, Serge Denham, Sol Hurok or choreographer Léonide Massine created their own fascination by continuing largely in the way Diaghilev had chosen.

Although they might not all have commissioned music from composers of the calibre of Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Debussy or Ravel, de Basil's new ballets were mostly created by Diaghilev's choreographers: Michel Fokine, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, George Balanchine, Lifar, and the young post-Diaghilev dancer, David Lichine, whose *Graduation Ball* had its premiere (attracting 25 curtain calls) at the Theatre Royal, Sydney, in August 1940.

In Australia, the de Basil companies created curiosity and expectation from the start, not only amongst balletomanes and upper-crust first-nighters but also among practitioners of all the arts. Max Dupain, Hugh P. Hall (see story, *National Library of Australia News*, October 2007) and Nanette Kuehn for instance, photographed them; Daryl Lindsay, like Enid Dickson (*National Library of Australia News*, August 2007) drew them on stage and in rehearsal. Composer John Antill said he was inspired by Stravinsky's *Firebird* score to write more seriously for ballet than the dance sketches he'd been writing years before, and Donald Friend won a design competition for a ballet that, sadly, did not eventuate. Sidney Nolan, on the other hand, was commissioned to create the designs for Lifar's ballet, *Icare*, based on the Greek myth of Daedalus and his son Icarus. The simple design, a white kiosk structure inspired by the one at the end of the St Kilda Pier, now seems the perfect foil for Lifar's muscular choreography and a modern percussion score. (Lifar rejected Nolan's original, more colourful designs, which he said would swamp his dancing. So, in the spirit of Picasso, who suffered a similar fate at Diaghilev's hands, Nolan reworked the designs.)

Many more artists were drawn to the ballet, not only by de Basil, but also by the small companies established by



three dancers who stayed in Australia and established the bedrock of today's professional companies. They maintained a commitment to innovation and commissioned new music for new choreographies. Hélène Kirsova led the field with Henry Krips's *Revolution of the Umbrellas* for the Kirsova Ballet in 1943. Esther Rofe composed *Terra Australis* for the Borovansky Ballet and Verdon Williams *The Outlaw* in 1951. Margaret Sutherland and Dorian Le Gallienne followed, and the most prolific of them, James Penberthy, wrote several new ballets such as *The Beach Inspector and the Mermaid* for Kira Bousloff and the embryonic West Australian Ballet.

Scenic artists William Constable and Elaine Haxton became regular designers for the Borovansky Ballet. Erica McGilchrist, Loudon Sainthill, Alan McCulloch, Kenneth Rowell and Ann Church are just some of the designer-artists who would follow them. The quality of their work is seldom spoken about in ballet circles today even though it was made evident in Alan McCulloch's ambitious *Art and the Theatre Exhibition* in 1984. Two exhibitions designed for the Adelaide symposium will remedy this situation. The Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), in conjunction with the *Ballets Russes Project*, will show some of Constable's and Haxton's evocative 1950s Expressionist designs, along with works by Sainthill, Lindsay and others from the AGSA's collection and the Barr Smith Library's Special Collections. At the Adelaide Festival Centre, photographs and ephemera, including newspaper reportage from the Performing Arts Collection, will cover the unimaginable excitement of the very first performances that the Ballets Russes gave in the city in 1936.

At the symposium, 23–25 May, Paul Kathner, a now retired scenic painter who began his career as Constable's apprentice in the J.C. Williamson theatre organisation, will join a panel discussion to speak about the felicitous qualities that painters and painting *per se* can bring to a ballet production. Designer Anna French will speak about her own rich and varied practice as a collaborator of leading Australian choreographers and also the way in which costumes are adapted between design and construction. Composer Gerard Brophy, who is composing a new production for The Australian Ballet, and Leigh Warren, director

of Leigh Warren and Dancers, will join them.

A rare pleasure will be a post-performance event with Australia's three Russian ballerinas, Irina Baronova, Anna Volkova and Sydney-born Valrene Tweedie (who was given the stage name Irina Lavrova). They will speak about their careers with The Australian Ballet's education manager, Colin Peasley, at the Festival Theatre where the Ballet will perform a program entitled *French Connections*. The featured works will be *Ballet Imperial*, Balanchine's tribute to the Imperial Theatre School of his youth in St Petersburg, Jerome Robbins's contemporary take on Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun*, and Polish choreographer Krzysztof Pastor's 2007 re-envisioning of Massine's *Symphonie Fantastique* (by Berlioz) for The Australian Ballet.

Three international guests will lead us back in time to Diaghilev, his artists and his ideals. Internationally acclaimed dance film producer Bob Lockyer, who assisted John Drummond in 1967, will reflect on matters of historical research and authenticity required to restage heritage ballet. He filmed Nijinska's most famous ballet, *Les Noces*, when she staged it for the Royal Ballet.

Stephanie Jordan, Director of the Centre for Dance Research, Roehampton University (UK), will expand on ideas about interdisciplinary collaborations which she formulated when examining the ways Stravinsky and Balanchine worked together. It is no surprise that theirs became one of the most extensive and fruitful collaborations in ballet history: Stravinsky was preternaturally gifted with the ability to understand choreographic structure, while Balanchine had an innate, sophisticated musicality.

After the three great British writers—Arnold Haskell, Cyril Beaumont and Richard Buckle—Lynn Garafola, Professor of Dance at Barnard College (Columbia University, New York) is the newest and most imaginative investigator of Diaghilev and his project. She will examine the collaborative ideal that progressed through the two Ballets Russes eras and some lesser-known but important collaborations in Serge Denham's Ballets Russes company,



Unknown photographer
Peggy Sager as the Spirit of
Australia, Martin Rubinstein as
the Explorer and Vassilie Trunoff
as the Aboriginal in 'Terra
Australis', choreographed by
Edouard Borovansky, Borovansky
Ballet, Melbourne, 1946
b&w photograph; 15.0 x 20.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pican23924450



clockwise from left:
Maurice Seymour (b.1904)
*Irina Baronova in 'Swan Lake',
Ballets Russes, c.1930s*
b&w photograph
18.8 x 14.6 cm
Manuscripts Collection
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Unknown photographer
*Valrene Tweedie as Columbine
in 'Carnaval' with Bruno Harvey
and Graeme Smith, Princess
Theatre, Melbourne, National
Theatre Ballet, 1953*
b&w negative; 7.6 x 10.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24110629

Maurice Seymour (b.1904)
*Anna Volkova in 'Les Sylphides',
Ballets Russes, c.1930s*
b&w photograph
19.0 x 13.5 cm
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms8495-23-1-s37-a1

the last, in America. And Australian scholar, Michael Christofidis will take a previously untrodden path by speaking about the Ballets Russes's unleashing of flamenco ballet in Australia, with Leon Woizikowsky's *L'Amour Sorcier* in Melbourne in 1936.

In a behind-the-scenes session, The Australian Ballet's repetiteur Wendy Walker, and music director Nicolette Fraillon, will discuss the process of drawing on archival film, photographs, notes and scores to restage Massine's *Les Présages*, danced to Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony* last year. This session will pin down the past and the present in very practical terms, closing the cycle that began with Diaghilev in 1909 and looking to the future of ballet in the years after the Ballets Russes centenary.

LEE CHRISTOFIS is the Library's Curator of Dance. His story on the acquisition of Hugh P. Hall's photographs of the Ballets Russes Australian tours appeared in the *National Library of Australia News* for October 2007



Note: *Graduation Ball* is still performed around the world today, most notably in regional Australia, where, since 2006, The Australian Ballet's Dancers Company has been touring it with *Les Sylphides* and *Aurora's Wedding* in a program celebrating the *Ballets Russes*.

The full *Ballets Russes in Australia* symposium program and booking details are available online at:

www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses/whatson.html or

www.australianballet.com.au/default.htm?article=347

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