

THE BALLETS RUSSES

IN AUSTRALIA 1936–1940

LEE CHRISTOFIS RECAPTURES THE
ASTONISHING ACHIEVEMENTS OF
THE INFLUENTIAL BALLETS RUSSES

WHEN THE MONTE CARLO RUSSIAN Ballet arrived in Adelaide in October 1936, audiences flocked to the theatre in unprecedented numbers, many of them queuing overnight for tickets. Here, at last, they could see the exciting company created by Cossack entrepreneur, Colonel Wassily de Basil (1880–1951), and presented by J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd. Swelling the numbers of balletomanes captivated by earlier tours of incomparable Russian ballerinas Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) in 1926 and 1929, and Olga Spessivtseva (1895–1991) in 1934, de Basil's tour was assured of success. Two more tours followed: the Covent Garden Russian Ballet in 1938 and 1939, and the Original Ballet Russe in late 1939 and 1940.

Audiences ranged across all social strata, and admirers went to performances as often as they could, crowding around the stage doors hoping to receive autographs from their favourite Russians. Artists, who had much to talk about with the dancers and choreographers, entertained them in their bohemian circle.

The de Basil companies had lengthy stays in Australia and helped to create a new and more discerning audience: the Monte Carlo company toured to Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane from October 1936 to July 1937, and the final Melbourne season of the Original Ballet Russe in 1940 lasted 13 weeks. Drawing on a repertoire of 44 ballets, five of them world premieres, the companies performed more than 640 times and in numerous charity galas. Sea travel to perform

in New Zealand provided the opportunity for rest and recreation for the dancers between the Australian seasons.

The leading artists of the Monte Carlo company's 51-strong ensemble were Hélène Kirsova, Valentina Blinova, Igor Yousskevitch, Leon Woizikovsky and Valentin Froman. Two 17-year-olds, Tamara Tchinarova and Sonia Woizikovska, introduced audiences to the much-publicised 'baby ballerina' phenomenon. Irina Baronova, Tamara Toumanova and Tatiana Riabouchinska, the most famous of the teenagers plucked from the Paris studios of immigrant Russian ballerinas to launch de Basil's new company in 1932, featured in the second and third tours. Young Australian dancers also performed with the company as extras in the *corps de ballet*. Only Valrene Tweedie (at 14 years of age) became a member of the company in 1940 and travelled with it to the Americas.

The Ballets Russes' repertoire was substantially different from anything that Australian audiences had seen before. During the three seasons, de Basil presented only three classics in short versions: *Aurora's Wedding* derived from *The Sleeping Princess*, and *Swan Lake* and *Coppelia*. These were enthusiastically received, opening the way for new ballets that de Basil added each season. The effect of the tours was immediate. It left audiences hungry for more, and grafted onto the collective Australian imagination the hope that a professional, home-grown Australian ballet could be

ABOVE
Bill (William) Constable
(1906–1989)
*Death of Petrouchka in the
Borovansky Production of
Petrouchka* c.1951
oil on canvas; 48.0 x 61.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3549683
Courtesy Tana Sophy Constable

BELOW
Max Dupain (1911–1992)
*Portrait of Colonel Wassily de
Basil* 1940
gelatin silver photograph
49.8 x 39.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an12114748
Courtesy Max Dupain Exhibition
Negative Archive

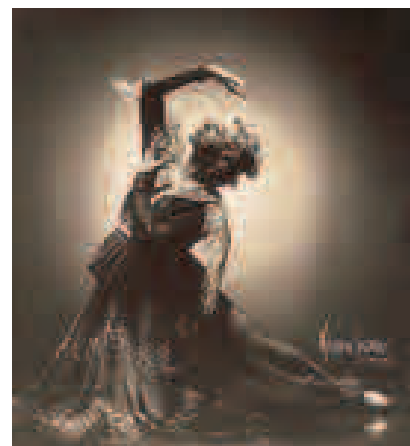
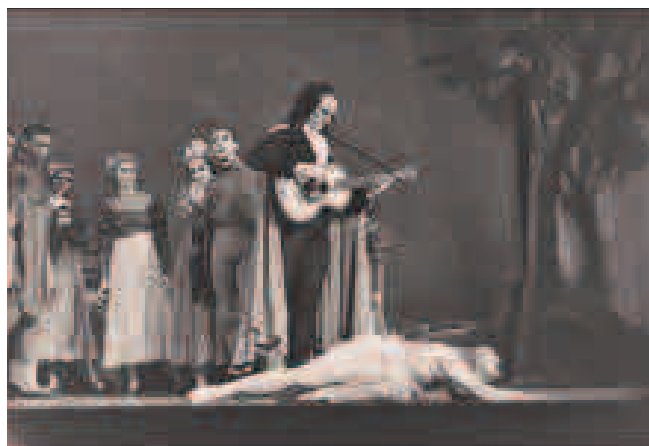




ABOVE, FROM LEFT
Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
A Cadet in the Wings,
Graduation Ball, *Borovansky*
Ballet c.1955
coloured slide; 35mm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24733664

Maurice Seymour (1904–1993)
Portrait of Anna Volkova as the
Principal Angel in Francesca da
Rimini, Ballets Russes (between
1930 and 1939)
sepia-toned gelatin silver print
25.7 x 20.3 cm
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of
Australian Ballet
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3415329

Unknown photographer
Dimitri Rostoff, Tatiana
Riabouchinska, Paul Petroff
and Dancers from The Original
Ballet Russe in Paganini 1940
b&w photograph; 23.3 x 34.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3534098



established, as indeed it was at the end of the last tour.

Colonel de Basil's companies brought to Australia some of the exotic and extravagant experiences that audiences in Europe and the Americas had enjoyed during the 20 illustrious years of the inaugural Ballet Russe, based in Paris and

directed by the renowned Russian impresario, Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929). In the five years from 1909, Diaghilev and his circle of artists presented 29 new ballets. Favourites among these were *Les Sylphides* (*The Sylphs*), the abstract Romantic ballet choreographed to the music of Frédéric Chopin; *Schéhérazade*, the erotic Oriental drama; and *L'Oiseau de Feu* (*The Firebird*), *Petrouchka* and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), which established composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) as an innovator and iconoclast.

Diaghilev provided the imagination and business acumen to create an enduring, albeit financially precarious, edifice. He was not, at first, a balletomane but a curator, writer, publisher and exporter of Russian art and opera. It is, therefore, no surprise that the Ballets Russes was founded not by choreographers but a group of artists from St Petersburg—visual, literary and musical—intent on creating a new form of dance theatre that integrated all the arts. From 1898 to 1904, Diaghilev and the artists produced the progressive and contentious magazine, *Mir Iskusstva* (*World of Art*), and took its title as their namesake.

In Michel Fokine (1880–1942) the *Mir Iskusstva* group found a choreographer who challenged the traditional, limiting practices of the Imperial Theatres. On joining the Ballets Russes, Fokine's name became intricately linked with other great Russian artists, including

legendary dancers Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950) and Tamara Karsavina (1885–1978), and artist-designers Léon Bakst (1880–1924) and Alexandre Benois (1890–1960). Over the next 30 years, other collaborators would include designer Nathalie Gontcharova (1881–1962) and composers Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) and Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943).

The explosion of colour and innovative choreography of de Basil's Ballets Russes challenged the expectations of staid or less informed ballet-goers. Léonide Massine's (1895–1979) 'symphonic ballets' were favourites with audiences, although conservative critics were infuriated by the use of symphonies to accompany dance. Massine's first such ballet, *Les Présages* (*Destiny*), danced to Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*, was performed over 170 times during the Australian tours. Australian audiences also adored Fokine, the master storyteller who created *Cendrillon* (*Cinderella*) and the riotous *Le Coq d'Or* (*The Golden Cockerel*), both lavishly designed by Gontcharova and rehearsed by Fokine during his visit to Australia with the second tour. Young company choreographers who emerged during this time were also well received, notably dancer David Lichine (1910–1972). He created strong, popular works, such as *Francesca da Rimini*, based on Tchaikovsky's symphonic poem, and a new version of George Balanchine (1904–1983) and Serge Prokofiev's (1891–1953) *L'Enfant Prodigue* (*The Prodigal Son*).

An immediate legacy of the Ballets Russes' Australian tours was the proliferation of art and documentation as the tours unfolded. The National Library of Australia has the nation's largest collection of de Basil-era material, acquired by dancers, artists, balletomanes and students. It includes works of art, scrapbooks,

letters, photographs, designs and programs. Emulating the *Mir Iskusstva* ethos, Australian artists were swiftly drawn into the three companies' ambit backstage, at parties, in cafes or private homes. Works by the Lindsay brothers—Norman's voluptuous *Schéhérazade* and Daryl's backstage drawings—graced the covers of souvenir programs. Enid Dickson's (1895–1967) pastels recreated the backstage atmosphere through her depictions of dancers wearing colourful, theatrical make-up. Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) was fortunate to be the only Australian whom de Basil commissioned to design a ballet, Serge Lifar's (1905–1986) *Icare* (Icarus) in 1940.

Encouraged by the Ballets Russes and J.C. Williamson Theatres, a band of creative photographers produced myriad images for magazines and journals, such as *Pix* and *Art in Australia*, souvenir publications, postcards and newspapers seen throughout Australia and abroad. Pre-eminent among them was Max Dupain (1911–1992), whose images of the dancers' exotic and glamorous appearance or more private moments were an aspect of his ongoing experimentation in style and technique. Julian Smith's romantic portraits of Sono Osato (b.1919), and Nanette Kuehn's heightened dramatic images of Anton Dolin (1904–1983) were also intimate and revealing. Melbourne solicitor and photographer, Hugh P. Hall (1899–1967) documented 30 ballets in performance from a dress-circle seat in His Majesty's Theatre (now Her Majesty's Theatre). Taking more than 1200 action shots over a period of two years, he left an astonishing record of the ballets, now used to refresh or reconstruct these heritage works.

The dancers and their Australian friends also took many photographs. A rare collection of 18 snapshots by the local dancer, Patricia Mary Cape, captures the dancers sunbathing and rehearsing on the deck of SS *Maloja* during the company's return to Australia in 1938. Ophthalmologist Joseph Ringland Anderson and dermatologist Ewan Murray-Will filmed the dancers on stage, leaving an invaluable, internationally renowned collection held at the National Film and Sound Archive.

The ultimate legacy of the Ballets Russes in Australia was the foundation of local professional ballet companies. Hélène Kirsova returned to Australia in 1940 and opened first a school and then, in 1941, the Kirsova Ballet. It closed in 1944, the year Edouard Borovansky (1902–1959) opened

the Borovansky Ballet in conjunction with J.C. Williamson; he and his wife Xenia (1903–1985) had established their Melbourne school on settling there in 1939. Like Kirsova, Borovansky collaborated with Australians to create new works. The most impressive and prolific designers were Williamson's designer, William Constable (1906–1989), who worked with Borovansky, and Loudon Sainthill (1918–1969), who designed for Kirsova. The Borovansky Ballet, the first lasting Australian ensemble, operated until Borovansky's death in 1959. In 1962, the company was transformed into The Australian Ballet, with English ballet mistress Peggy van Praagh (1910–1990) as the artistic director.

Other organisations emerged in the wake of the Ballets Russes. Borovansky ballerina, Laurel Martyn (b.1916), established Melbourne's Ballet Guild in 1946 and in 1952 Ballets Russes dancer, Kira Bousloff (1914–2001), established the West Australian Ballet, joined by Kiril Vassilkovksy (1919–2008), a Borovansky ballet master and choreographer. Valrene Tweedie returned from America in 1952 and became the National Theatre Ballet's third director. She became a prolific choreographer for television and founded Ballet Australia in 1960, the year a former Borovansky student, Charles Lisner (1928–1988), established the Queensland Ballet.

Today, a multitude of dance companies, ensembles and independent artists continues to spread around the globe, just as the number of artists collaborating across all the arts grows exponentially every year. While we sometimes take for granted this burgeoning of creative art practice, we should never forget their century-old source—the astonishing achievements with paint, canvas, light and music of the Ballets Russes.

BELOW
Unknown photographer
*Serge Ismailoff, Anna Volkova,
Oleg Tupin, Tamara Tchinarova
and Paul Petroff (behind),
Ballets Russes Australia, 1937*
gelatin silver print
11.1 x 15.3 cm
Papers of Tamara Finch,
1931–2000
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms9733-5-19

.....
LEE CHRISTOFIS is
Curator of Dance at
the National Library
of Australia

