

# *the Ballets Russes* IN AUSTRALIA 1936–1940

## *Exhibition Activity Sheet*

In 1909, the Russian, Sergei Diaghilev, founded the Ballets Russes (this is French for the Russian Ballets), a travelling ballet company that performed in many countries including England, the United States of America and Spain.

The Ballets Russes was one of the most important theatre companies of the twentieth century because of the way dancers, choreographers, artists and composers all worked together to create an exciting new kind of ballet. The company was a huge sensation around the world.

After Diaghilev's death in 1929, his company closed and the dancers were forced to find new jobs. In 1932, Colonel Wassily de Basil, a former Russian military officer, brought the company back together under the name Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. The company became very famous.

De Basil's company made three tours to Australia between 1936 and 1940. Their audiences were very enthusiastic and began learning a lot about ballet. The Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo inspired the creation of new ballets in Australia.

During the Second World War (1939–1945), many dancers of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo could not return home safely. Several stayed in Australia and established dance studios. They also established Australia's first professional companies.

The National Library of Australia holds the nation's largest collection of Ballets Russes material, including works of art, scrapbooks compiled by dancers and their fans, letters, photographs and programs. You can see many of these items in this exhibition.



Front cover of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo's souvenir book, 1936

The Ballets Russes included some famous 'baby ballerinas'. Irina Baronova and Tamara Toumanova were both only 13 years old and Tatiana Riabouchinska was only 15 when they were asked to join the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. They all performed in Australia.

Young Australian dancers also joined the company as extras or danced in the corps de ballet (the dancers in a ballet company who perform as a group and have no solo parts). Australian girl, 14-year-old Valrene Tweedie, joined the company in 1940 and travelled with it to North and South America.



*Irina Baronova,  
1930s*



*Tamara Toumanova,  
1930s*

### Activity

Would you like to be a world-famous child performer like Irina and Tamara were in the 1930s or like Miley Cyrus is today? What would be good about it? What wouldn't be so good about it?

| THE POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF BEING A FAMOUS PERFORMER |             |
|---|-------------|
| Good  | Not so good |
|   |             |
|   |             |
|   |             |
|   |             |
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*David Lichine,  
1940*

Tatiana Riabouchinska's dance partner was David Lichine whom she later married.

### Activity

Find this picture of David Lichine in the exhibition on the 4th floor.

What ballet is he performing in? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the name of his character? \_\_\_\_\_

Well-known Australian visual artists such as Sidney Nolan, Grace Cossington Smith and William Constable were inspired by the Ballets Russes to interpret Russian dance and music for Australian performances.

Constable's first designs were for the Australian company called the Borovansky Ballet in 1940. This painting shows his costume design for Romeo in the ballet *Les Amants Éternels* (*The Eternal Lovers*) in 1952, based on the famous play *Romeo and Juliet*.

## Activity

Find the costume and set designs by William Constable.

Draw Juliet and design a costume that will go with this Romeo.



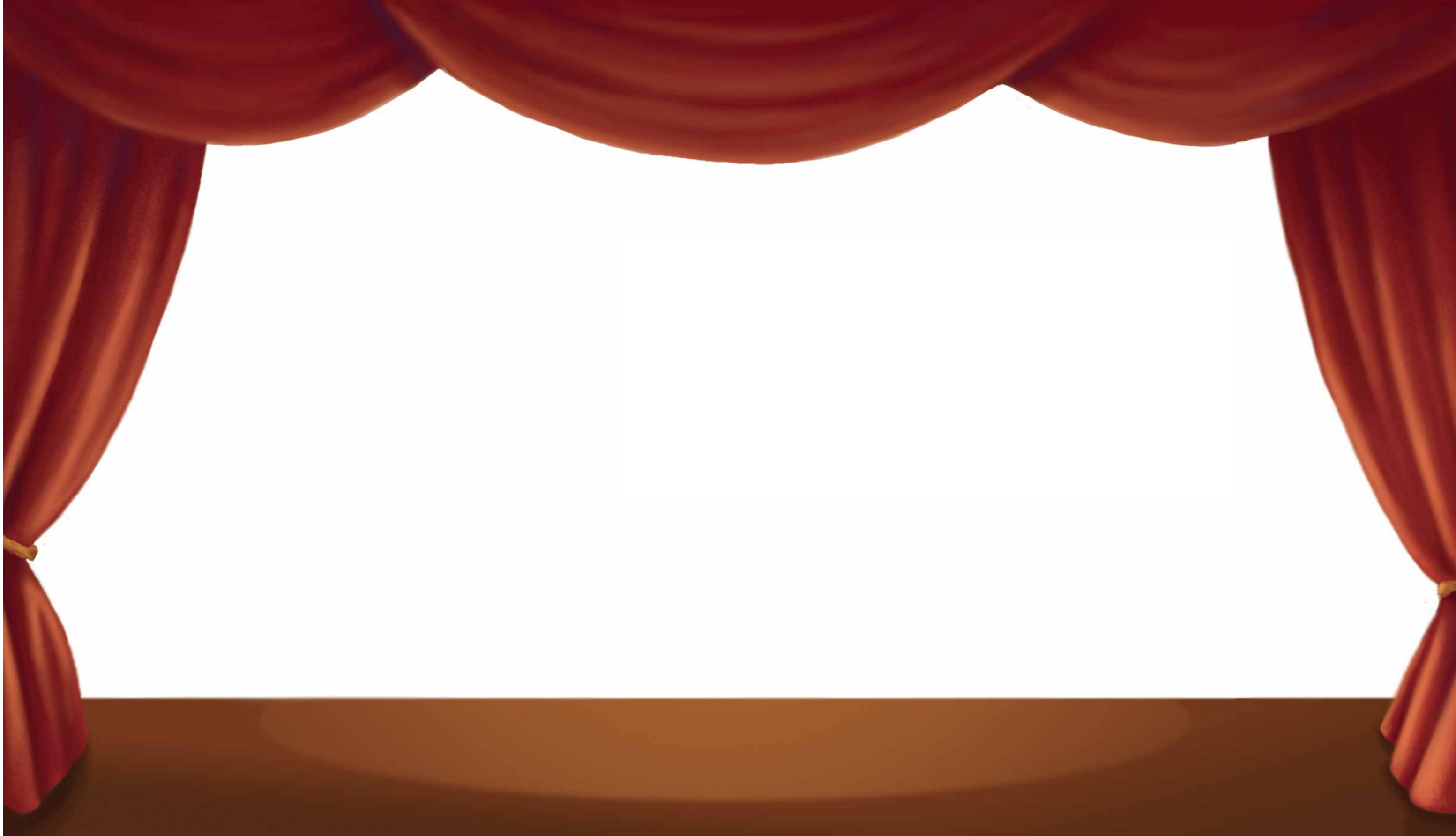
## Activity

Set designers create the scenery in a play or movie. They have to think of everything that will go on the stage, including costumes, furniture, lighting, props, or maybe even trapdoors, smoke machines, and animals!

Find paintings in the exhibition of the sets for the ballet *Petrouchka*.

Choose one painting. Copy the set design or draw your own set design on the stage below.

Choose a dancer from one of the *Petrouchka* paintings. Draw her or him on the stage.



## Activity

Find these photos and painting in the exhibition.

Draw a line between the famous ballet and the story on which it was based.



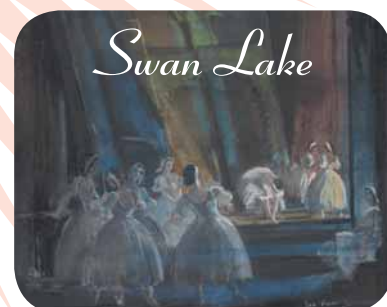
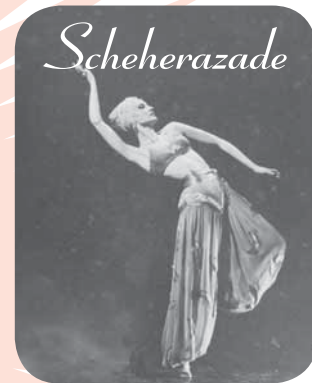
A girl called the *Spirit of Australia* attracts the attentions of an Aboriginal man and a European explorer.

A princess, Odette, is under an evil sorcerer's spell. She is a *swan* by day and a human by night. A prince falls in love with her.

A *Russian puppet*, made of straw and sawdust, comes to life and has emotions, just like a real person.

Daedalus and his son, Icarus, build *wings* of wax and feathers to fly away but Icarus flies too close to the Sun. His wings melt and he crashes into the sea.

For '*one thousand and one nights*', the wife of the Shah (King) of Persia (present-day Iran) must amuse him with stories and dance.



Find out more about the Ballets Russes in Australia by going to [www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses](http://www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses) or [www.australiadancing.org](http://www.australiadancing.org)

### Picture Credits (in order from the first page)

Souvenir book cover, *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* (Col. W. de Basil's) Ltd. 1936; Australian Collection, nla.aus-vn143713-1-1-1

Portrait of Irina Baronova in *Le Spectre de la Rose*, Ballets Russes, 1930s; Manuscripts Collection, nla.ms-ms8495-23-1-s51-a1

Studio portrait of Tamara Toumanova, 1930s; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3410320

Max Dupain (1911–1992), David Lichine in *L'après-midi d'un Faun*, 1940; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an12114773

William Constable (1906–1989), Costume design for Romeo in the Borovansky Ballet production of *Les Amants Éternels*, 1952; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3310072

Nanette Kuehn, Yura Lazovsky in the title role of *Petroushka*, Ballets Russes Australian tours, between 1938 and 1940; Manuscripts Collection, nla.ms-ms8495-23-2-s12-a2

Maurice Seymour (1904–1993), Valrene Tweedie as Odalisque in *Scheherazade*, Chicago, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1947–1948; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an13711129-5

Consolidated Press, Peggy Sager as the Spirit of Australia, Martin Rubinstein as the Explorer and Vassilie Trunoff as the Aboriginal in *Terra Australis*, 1946; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23924450

Portrait of Serge Lifar in costume for *Icare*, Ballets Russes, 1940; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3413383

Len Annois (1906–1966), Sketch for *Swan Lake*, 1940s; Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an21735930