

Weighty record of our national ballet

The book marking 50 years is a grand tome, **Michelle Potter** writes

The Australian Ballet will celebrate its 50th birthday in 2012 and to kick-start the celebrations the company has released a coffee-table book called *Luminous: Celebrating 50 Years of The Australian Ballet*. Twenty-five years ago The Australian Ballet also produced a celebratory publication: *The Australian Ballet: 25 Years*. But what a difference 25 years has made.

While the previous anniversary publication was a modest paperback, this latest book is large, very large. And heavy. It is a hardback publication and has its own (heavy) slip case. It has been designed and produced to a high technical standard and contains more than 200 photographs, a mix of colour and black and white, documenting the company's five decades of existence. Some pages and the cover are a collage of overlapping images. The book also includes several appendices of information, very useful for future researchers, about company repertoire, personnel and international tours from 1962 to 2011.

Photographs range from shots in rehearsal and production photographs to staged images used for publicity campaigns and shots of ancillary artistic staff. Some items from The Australian Ballet's collection of designs on paper are also included.

Many of the images have become iconic and everyone will have a favourite or two. I have always admired Justin Smith's photograph of Madeleine Eastoe, a



current Australian Ballet principal, dressed in costume for the well-known Romantic ballet *La Sylphide*. What makes it especially admirable is that Smith has captured so much of what is inherent to the Romantic movement in ballet – Eastoe is the unattainable sylph with her aerial beauty and gossamer dress, and yet the turn of the head, the slightly open mouth, the wispy hair around her face signals danger for any man who will seek her out.

I am a great fan, too, of Jim McFarlane's image of Vicki Attard, a principal dancer from the 1990s, dressed in a Hugh Colman-designed tutu from *The Sleeping Beauty*. She is standing in Ueno Market in Tokyo surrounded by boxes of fruit and vegetables and a man carrying two plastic shopping bags. She holds a camera to her face with its lens pointing out of the picture frame. Taken on a 1995 tour by The Australian Ballet, the image is a complex layering of the ordinary with the extraordinary and implicitly asks the question: at what, or at whom, is Attard

pointing her camera (is it us?).

The book also includes an introduction by Helen Garner and several essays by Australian arts writers, each dealing with a separate decade. The emphasis on photography extends to these essays. The writers seem to have been given a brief to discuss those photographers who made major contributions in each decade, or how dance photography has changed, or even how it has defined the company over the decades.

Some do it better than others; in the less successful cases the reference to photographers is forced. On the other hand, Michael Shmith, whose essay deals with the 1990s, has taken one iconic image – Jim McFarlane's shot of Justine Summers in Stanton Welch's ballet *Divergence* – and has used it as a starting point to discuss the way in which The Australian Ballet's 1990s repertoire became "increasingly contemporary, increasingly Australian and . . . increasingly risky."

But, in the end, this grand publication is not user friendly. I guess if a coffee table book is meant simply to sit on a coffee table and be flicked through spasmodically then I should have no complaints. But for people who like to do a bit more with their books there are irritations, not the least of which is the book's size and weight. It is also not easy to find captions for the photographs. A few of the images are accompanied by a short paragraph of text, and I got off to a bad start when my initial "flick through"



David McAllister, Miranda Coney, Maina Gielgud and Princess Diana; Leanne Stojmenov in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Photos: Ronald G. Pell, Jim McFarlane

took me to two of these stories with spelling errors in them. Of all things, the errors were the incorrect spelling of two dancers' names.

I also longed for essays that were more about dancing and less about opening night parties and other anecdotal material. And it seems to have been forgotten in the hype that has grown up about the Ballets Russes visits (one essay deals yet again with the Russian visits to Australia and the effect they had on the development of ballet in Australia) that an English company, Ballet Rambert, also had an effect. In fact, the Rambert tour

of 1947-1949 brought to Australia Margaret Scott who, along with some Rambert colleagues and others, was instrumental in the negotiations that led to the formation of a national company. Scott was then involved in the founding of The Australian Ballet School. It would be nice to have some balance in the prehistory of the Australian Ballet.

■ *Luminous* is available via The Australian Ballet's website www.australianballet.com.au/luminous and at selected stockists in the ACT.