

Growing in Australian Soil

An interview with
Graeme Murphy
recorded by Hazel de
Berg in 1981

edited and introduced by
Michelle Potter

In 1981 Graeme Murphy and his then relatively new Sydney Dance Company made their American debut. The tour included a season in New York at City Center in May where the dancers presented three separate programs of choreography by Murphy, Barry Moreland, Paul Saliba and Carl Morrow.¹

In April, shortly before the company left for the United States, the pioneering Australian oral historian Hazel de Berg recorded an archival interview with Murphy.² The American tour, in fact, seemed to be what prompted many of the questions that de Berg posed. None of the questions de Berg put to Murphy remains in any tangible form, however, since it was de Berg's modest policy not to record her own voice. She would always switch off the apparatus while she asked her questions. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to locate most of the places where de Berg intervened with a question, or even to imagine the content, if not the exact wording, of those questions.

De Berg's interviews were always clearly structured, although they did not necessarily follow a linear

chronological format. Oral history interviews have, by their very nature, a conversational, and hence often random, quality to the organisation of the information contained in them. In the interview with Murphy, de Berg often moves backwards in time juxtaposing material about Murphy's career prior to being appointed artistic director of Sydney Dance Company against more recent activities. In his answers, Murphy also constantly moves between present and past.

*From the point of view of our understanding of Murphy as one of Australia's leading dance-makers, an especially notable aspect of the interview is the discussion of Murphy's approach to choreography. In particular, Murphy's analysis of two of his full-length works, *Poppy* (1978) and *Rumours* (1978–79) both made when the company was still called *The Dance Company (NSW)*,³ reflects Murphy's ongoing interest in creating work that is inherently Australian. The interview also reveals his wish to understand and articulate what constitutes Australian work. The discussion is made more poignant when seen as a reflection of Murphy's aspirations for his company on the eve of its important American debut. Murphy's feeling of trepidation at the undertaking is coupled with a strong sense that the tour was a necessary step in the development of his company. As source material, the interview thus becomes not simply an early account of Murphy's work and approach, but a glimpse of the entanglement between personal ideals and public expectations.*