



Ballet Rambert Creates a Splash

From the 1920s Marie Rambert, founder of Ballet Rambert, nurtured the creation of new choreography. Michelle Potter explores her ongoing influence on the development of dance in this country

Marie Rambert was fond of turning cartwheels. She cartwheeled into a liberated Berlin in 1945, and even into old age this form of physical activity continued to be something of a Rambert signature. This adventurous, Polish-born woman began her dance training in Paris, studied with Jacques Dalcroze, inventor of eurhythmics, worked with Vaslav Nijinsky on some of his most spectacular ballets, and eventually came to London where she married the playwright Ashley Dukes. With Dukes she founded the Mercury Theatre and Ballet Rambert, a small ballet company that gave its first performances in the 1920s. Rambert nurtured the creation of new choreography and, although she died

in 1982, her achievements and ideals are still being celebrated. Now with a contemporary brief and a name change to Rambert Dance Company, the enterprise she founded performs regularly in London where, in the footsteps of its founder, it continues to nurture new work.

In the late 1940s, in association with the British Council and under the auspices of the entrepreneur D.D. O'Connor, Marie Rambert led a long and remarkable tour to Australia. The 15-month season, which had originally been planned to last only six months, began in Melbourne in October 1947 and concluded in Perth in January 1949. The company gave over 500

performances and appeared in Adelaide, Brisbane, Broken Hill, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. It also undertook a tour to New Zealand in May 1948.

Ballet Rambert maximised its opportunities to create a splash in Australia. Marie Rambert herself was tiny in size—not much more than one and a half metres in height—but big in personality.



(above) Covers reproduced from Ballet Rambert, Australia–New Zealand Tour, 1947–1948

Programs 1, 3 and 9
PROMPT Collection, Ballet Rambert,
October 1947 – January 1948

(right) Jean Stewart (born 1921)
Sally Gilmour in *Giselle*, Ballet
Rambert c.1948

black and white photograph;
14.9 x 11.7 cm
nla.pic-an23737685
Pictures Collection PIC/P348/RAM/
24 Album 810/13

Clippings from Australian newspapers constantly refer to her as a dynamic and vibrant woman, and she made many public appearances during the Rambert season. Nor was she averse to being photographed with her sponsors and supporters. One clipping, from a scrapbook held in the National Library's Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet, shows her being supported in a balletic pose by entrepreneur Sir Benjamin Fuller. He, somewhat portly, looks decidedly bemused and slightly embarrassed, while she is clearly in her element.

She had glamorous and charismatic dancers in her company too, and newspapers made much of their charm. Leading dancer, Sally Gilmour, an acclaimed interpreter of *Giselle*, was a favourite with the press, as was Scottish-born principal Walter Gore. The dancers also threw themselves into the social and creative life of the cities they visited. When in Sydney they frequented Merioola, the large boarding house in Wollahara that was home to a dynamic if somewhat bohemian colony of artistic colleagues, including photographers, visual artists, scenic designers and composers. In a

of visitors; both local and overseas artists would call in [and] the mix of creative people at Merioola often led to interdisciplinary activities. The dancers would pose for [Arthur] Fleischmann or Alec Murray. The artists would make sets for theatrical activities. And Harry [Tatlock Miller] and Loudon [Sainthill] and Alec [Murray] would combine their talents as editor, designer and photographer for Ballet Rambert and Old Vic programs.

Ballet and modern dance were not unknown quantities to Australian audiences when the Rambert



(above) *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane
Portrait of Marie Rambert 1948
black and white photograph;
16.5 x 12 cm
nla.pic-an240247909
Pictures Collection PIC/P554/BR78
LOC Album 912/1

(left) Portrait of Sally Gilmour reproduced from Ballet Rambert, Australia–New Zealand Tour, 1947–1948
Program 3
PROMPT Collection, Ballet Rambert,
October 1947 – January 1948

(far left) Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
Ballet Rambert performance of Bar aux Folies-Bergère, starring Joyce Graeme, Princess Theatre 1947
black and white photograph;
21.5 x 16.3 cm
nla.pic-23954411
Pictures Collection PIC/P554/BR/55
LOC Album 912/1



company arrived. Three Ballets Russes tours to Australia between 1936 and 1940 had been hugely successful, and had done much to establish audiences for ballet. Edouard Borovansky and Hélène Kirsova built on the successes of these tours and both established Australian ballet companies in the early 1940s. At the same time modern dancers, such as Gertrud Bodenwieser in Sydney and Sonia Revid in Melbourne, were bringing the new, European expressionist dance to Australian audiences.

But Ballet Rambert was different. It was an English company and as such presented Australian audiences with a very different repertoire from what they were used to. Of course the tried and true classics were there—*Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and *Les Sylphides*—no company would dream of touring without them. But out of a repertoire of just over 30 ballets, 26 were contemporary English creations, and

many also had designs by English scenic designers. Ballet Rambert introduced Australian audiences to the work of English choreographers, such as Frederick Ashton, Frank Staff, Walter Gore, Andrée Howard, Antony Tudor and Ninette de Valois, and to new, young English designers, including Nadia Benois, Harry Cordwell, Sophie Fedorovitch and Hugh Stevenson.

In addition to presenting a new, fresh, English repertoire, the Ballet Rambert tour had a lasting impact on the development of dance in Australia. The company engaged several Australian dancers for its Australian tour, notably Kathleen Gorham, who danced under the name Ann Somers, and Charles Boyd,

National Library seminar on the work of artist Donald Friend, held in 2001, curator Christine France described the atmosphere at Merioola:

In post-war Sydney, Merioola was probably the most exciting place to live. Justin O'Brien said, 'I've never laughed so much, not at people but with people.' Merioola was always full



Walter Gore at 'Merioola' 1948
gelatin silver photograph; 25.7 x 22.4 cm
nla.pic-an23737685
Pictures Collection PIC/3383/2 LOC Box
PIC/3383

who had performed with the Rambert company in London in the early 1940s. Gorham was given many opportunities with the Rambert company, including the chance, at the age of 16, to dance the lead in *Swan Lake* Act II. Both Gorham and Boyd subsequently had significant careers with the Borovansky Ballet, and Gorham with the Australian Ballet during its early years.

There was also one world premiere during the Rambert tour, which had a strong Australian element in its production and performance. Walter Gore's tenth ballet, *Winter Night*, opened in Melbourne on 19 November 1948. Its corps de ballet consisted largely of Australian dancers, including Cecil Bates and twins Joan and Monica Halliday, and it was designed by Kenneth Rowell, then aged 28. In an oral history interview recorded for the National Library in 1989, Rowell recalled that Gore saw one of his designs in a

friend's house, and as a result invited him to work on *Winter Night*. It was Rowell's first professional commission for a dance company, and perhaps his first major success in what would be a long and illustrious career as a scenic designer.

When the artists of Ballet Rambert left Fremantle for London in January 1949 aboard the *SS Arawa*, Gorham and Bates were on board hoping to continue their careers overseas. But a number of Rambert dancers stayed behind. They included Margaret Scott and Joyce Graeme whose subsequent contributions to dance in Australia were of major significance. Graeme became the inaugural artistic director of the Melbourne-based National Theatre Ballet, which staged its first production in 1949. Over the period of her directorship Graeme commissioned a range of original ballets from Australian choreographers, including works from Kira Bousloff, Laurel Martyn, Joanne Priest and Rex Reid. Her directorship was also distinguished by the premiere of *Corroboree*, a ballet choreographed by Reid to the music of John Antill in 1950, and in 1951 by the production

of the first full-length version of *Swan Lake* to be performed in Australia. For her part, Scott was a signatory to the submission to the Australia Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1960 that eventually led to the formation of the Australian Ballet. She went on to become founding artistic director of the Australian Ballet School, a position she held from 1964 to 1990. Scott returned to the stage in the 1990s as Clara the Elder, in the Australianised *Nutcracker*, choreographed by Graeme Murphy, whom she had taught at the Australian Ballet School.

The Ballet Rambert tour to Australia, and its importance, has received little recognition in Australia, having been eclipsed by the attention given to the glamorous and well-documented Ballets Russes tours of 1936–1940. While the full impact of the company in Australia is yet to be assessed, there is little doubt that Marie Rambert's dynamism and determination, and her interest in new initiatives, have had an ongoing influence on the development of dance in this country.

The National Library's material relating to Ballet Rambert's Australian tour crosses all its collecting areas. There is a significant collection of photographs in the W.F. Stringer Collection, and a smaller one in the Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet. Oral history interviews with Margaret Scott, Charles Boyd, Kenneth Rowell and Rex Reid all touch, to a greater or lesser extent, on the influence of Marie Rambert and her ballet company. The papers of Cecil Bates, Charles Boyd and Geoffrey Ingram contain manuscript items and photographs relating to the Rambert tour. There is also a comprehensive electronic finding aid to the National Library's holdings of programs for Ballet Rambert's Australian and New Zealand tour, which includes a list of repertoire as well as a chronology of the tour.

MICHELLE POTTER is the Library's Curator of Dance. Her book, *A Collector's Book of Australian Dance*, was recently published by the National Library