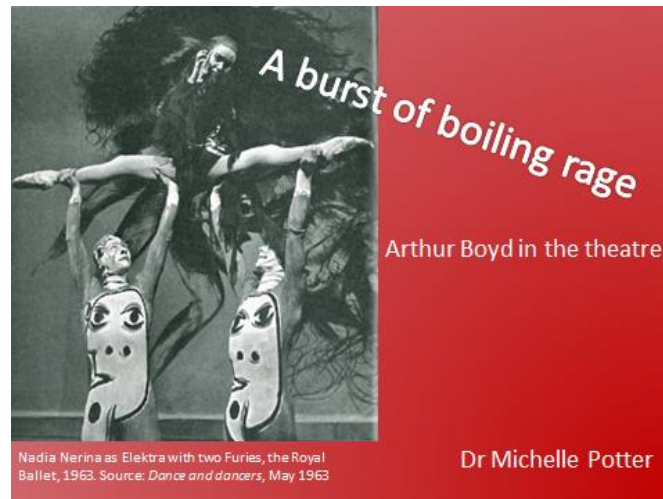


## *A burst of boiling rage: Arthur Boyd in the theatre*

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Talk given at the National Gallery of Australia, 9 September 2014, in conjunction with the exhibition *Arthur Boyd: Agony and Ecstasy*

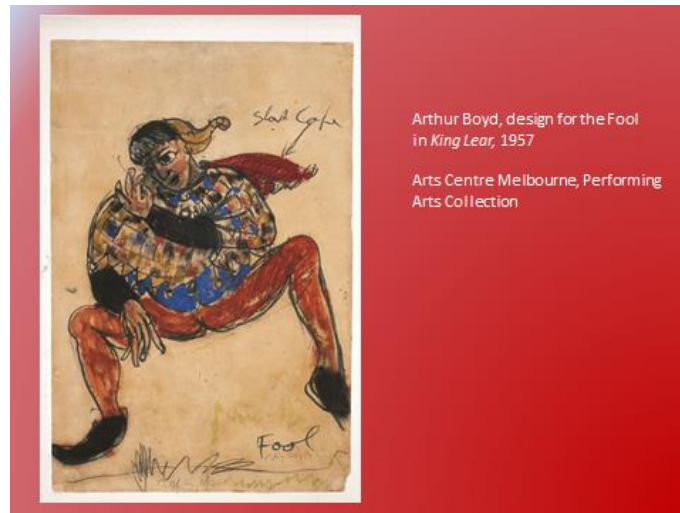


I'd like to begin my talk today by explaining briefly, because we'll return to it later, the title I have chosen for my talk today. 'A burst of boiling rage' was part of a review of *Elektra*, a ballet created by Robert Helpmann for the Royal Ballet. It had a commissioned score by Malcolm Arnold, designs by Arthur Boyd, and it premiered in London in March 1963. The review was written by Richard Buckle for *The Sunday Times* and Buckle wrote: 'It opens with drums and brass in a burst of boiling rage'. But more of reviews and rage later. The image on the opening slide is of leading ballerina Nadia Nerina, who created the role of Elektra, being held aloft by two of eight Erinyes, variously called in writing about the ballet, Erinyes, Spirits of Vengeance, Fates or Furies. Furies seems to be the most common so I will use that unless I am quoting and a different term is used in the quote.

As introductory material, I'd like to play you a very brief extract from an oral history interview with Arthur Boyd, recorded in London for the National Library of Australia in September 1965. The interviewer, whom you will hear right at the beginning of this extract, is Hal Missingham, who, at that the time he recorded the interview, was director of the Art

Gallery of New South Wales. Boyd answers a question from Missingham on his attitude to designing for the theatre.

Boyd made his first designs for the theatre in Melbourne in the 1950s for Peter O'Shaughnessy's productions of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 1955 and *King Lear* in 1957. On the screen now is Boyd's design for the Fool in *King Lear*, which was staged at the Arrow Theatre in Melbourne in July 1957.



Boyd also designed a costume worn by Barry Humphries in O'Shaughnessy's 1958 play for children *The Bunyip and the Satellite* and there is an image of Barry Humphries wearing that costume in the catalogue to the Gallery's Boyd exhibition.<sup>1</sup> These early works by Boyd warrant a little more investigation, which I hope to pursue at a later date.

But in 1959 Boyd set off for England and it was there that he created designs for two ballets. His first commission came from a small company, initially based in Bristol and set up in 1957, not long before Boyd arrived in England. It was named Western Theatre Ballet and was directed by British dancer and choreographer Peter Darrell who wanted, he said to a journalist once, 'to kill the image of an insular little group of pretty tarlatan-ed sylphs'.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to emphasise the dramatic side of dance and to train dancers to act as well as dance. As a company it struggled to make ends meet but its big break came when the company was invited to be part of the 1961 Edinburgh Festival. Darrell devised a triple bill program for Edinburgh. It included a new production of *Le Renard*, a ballet based on a Russian folk tale first produced for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Paris in 1922. Then it had choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, sister of Vaslav Nijinsky, designs by Mikhail Larionov

and music by Igor Stravinsky. Its seemingly simple plot concerns a fox (*le renard*) who, disguised as a nun and then a beggar, tries to lure a cock from his perch. When the cock finally comes down from the perch he is grabbed by the fox but then rescued by his friends the Cat and the Goat. The Diaghilev productions, and there was a revival in 1929 with new choreography by Serge Lifar, treated the ballet as a fair-booth drama.

For the Western Theatre Ballet production, which was choreographed by South African dancer Alfred Rodriques, Boyd provided a front curtain in a linear style showing what Peter Williams has described in *Dance and Dancers* as 'a group of animals in a death scuffle'.<sup>3</sup> You can probably make out the goat from his horns, the cock with his feathers and crest, the fox with his pointed nose and protruding eyes, and the cat with his whiskers.



Boyd's black and white cloth for *Renard* represented the exterior of the fairground booth. It folded away to reveal the interior. The interior cloth is more painterly and in colour (according to reviewers, although I haven't been able to find a coloured image as yet) and you can again recognise the animals. Boyd recalls having to construct most of his set, which also, according to reviews, had a small platform placed centre-stage and pole representing a tree. Boyd's designs were praised both in Edinburgh and a little later when Western Theatre Ballet appeared at Sadler's Wells in London. 'The black and white canvas is beautifully executed and has a flow and sensitivity in its composition that owes much to Japanese masters of line,' wrote Williams. 'The main, and coloured setting owes something in its approach to Chagall, possibly a little too much because it tends to overpower the dancers and the action. Personally I should have been quite content to listen to Stravinsky's score

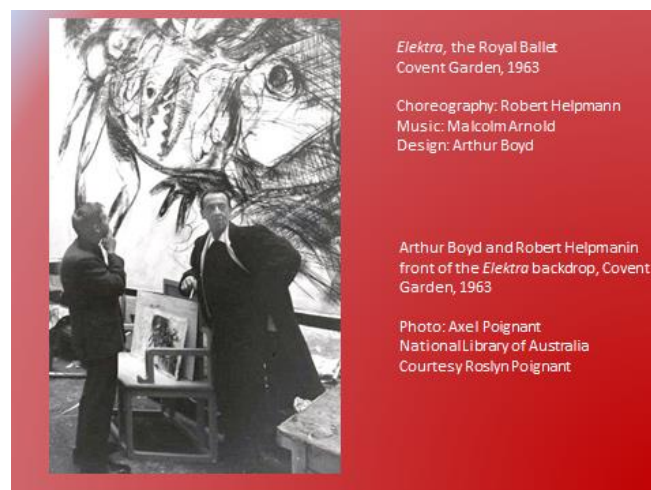
and just look at both these cloths for they underline and supplement the drama in the music to a far greater extent than could any actual production.’<sup>4</sup>

Boyd’s costumes for *Le Renard* are a little hard to fathom in terms of what they looked like when made up because I haven’t been able to find a photograph of the dancers in costume. But the designs suggest that he had the dancers in simple practice clothing, unitard style, with the addition of markers of various kinds. His notes on the goat for example say ‘goat-like beard, white horns, black cap, tight black tights’. And the review by Williams in *Dance*



*and dancers* confirms this. ‘Boyd’s weakness, Williams writes, ‘as with so many painters working in the theatre for the first time [Williams of course was not exactly correct in the case of Boyd], lies in his costumes. He rather shirked the issue by giving the dancers all-over tights with additions...’<sup>5</sup>

But Boyd’s major piece of theatrical design was yet to come. That was *Elektra*.



On the screen now you can see a photograph taken by Axel Poignant showing Boyd with Robert Helpmann, choreographer of *Elektra*. It seems, however, that Boyd was not Helpmann's first choice as designer. Helpmann had originally asked Francis Bacon but, as I understand it from Zoe Anderson's history of the Royal Ballet, the Covent Garden Board found the Bacon designs 'had a certain distinction', but thought they were too large and not a practical proposition.<sup>6</sup> So Helpmann approached Boyd. In a newspaper interview he told a journalist that he had chosen Boyd 'because his colours and the way he uses them seemed right for what I had in mind. But all I have told him is that I want a door and some stairs, and the rest is up to him'.<sup>7</sup> Helpmann seems never to have made mention of Bacon, and neither have his biographers, but then Helpmann was good at ignoring what he didn't wish to talk about.

The ballet was a distillation of the Greek myth in which Elektra vengefully muses on the murder of her father, Agamemnon, by her mother, Clytemnestra, and her mother's lover, Aegisthus. She is then party to the killing of her mother and her mother's lover by Orestes, her brother. The ballet takes place over three scenes, named in programs as 'Elektra's torment', 'Orestes' homecoming', and 'The Revenge'. It was short, just fifteen minutes long, but sensational: reaction to it was mostly one of shock. Clive Barnes wrote: 'Helpmann's *Elektra* may possibly be the first ballet ever to make me physically ill. After the first performance, within about five minutes of the final curtain...I developed a splitting headache. I took my temperature and it was sub-normal. Now the curious thing is that when I saw *Elektra* again I got very similar symptoms.'<sup>8</sup> It was called it a 'balletic vipers' nest', 'petty eroticism', and 'an insult to the intelligence'. And many other less than complimentary phrases were applied to it.

But there was largely agreement from the critics about Boyd's designs. Going back to my title, the review from which it came said: 'It opens with drums and brass in a burst of boiling rage. Scarlet floorcloth and a flight of scarlet steps set off Arthur Boyd's huge images of love and death drawn in black and white. [Nadia] Nerina, made up witch-like with streaming vermilion hair, gloating over her avenging axe is Elektra. [David] Blair, naked and red-headed, is Orestes'.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the images on the screen now, you can see the scarlet floorcloth and steps and, peering hard at the image on the left, you can just make out Elektra's streaming vermillion hair as she is tossed through the air. These images come from the Australian production



and as you can see they are old-fashioned transparencies from the National Archives and they haven't been made up as hi-res shots, and so don't enlarge well. But I hope it gives you an idea of how the red and the black worked together, and the idea that Darleen Bungey puts forward in her biography of Boyd that the red flowed and shone like a river of spilt blood across the entire floor.<sup>10</sup>

The eroticism of which the critics complained was an overriding aspect of Helpmann's choreography and staging. He was creating choreography that was blatantly sexual and considered by many to be vulgar, crude and suggestive. Helpmann's followers have suggested that the choreography was actually ahead of its time in its acrobatic physicality, and there were certainly some astonishing moves especially for *Elektra* who was thrown through the air over and over. There are reports, too, that when the Royal Ballet took the work to New York one woman screamed and fainted at these spectacular throws.

Going back to Blair and Nerina, in this shot you can see the Orestes costume quite well. He wears brown body make-up and a metallic-studded, pair of gold trunks with a strategically placed eye. And I'll come back to this costume a little later. Also notice the little decoration on Elektra's costume as I'll mention that again too.





The majority of critics and writers of letters to the editor were affronted. Clive Barnes wrote in *Dance and dancers*: 'The new ballet opens with Elektra in a sort-of open crotch position at the top of a short flight of stairs. She is holding an axe above her head and is looking distraught.'<sup>11</sup> Darleen Bungey calls it 'legs spread-eagled'. Barnes, in a further description of the ballet uses phrases such as '[Elektra] performs a modest amount of toe dancing, strongly accented with crotch flings of the leg...' Another critic describes Clytemnestra and Aegisthus 'having mad sex', ... and so on.



It is quite clear that Boyd fell in with the spirit of eroticism that Helpmann envisaged, although he claims his designs were modified somewhat. The costume Boyd set out to design for Clytemnestra, for example, had a serpent twirling around Clytemnestra's legs

ending in a jaw-like image at the groin. The serpent refers to a dream Clytemnestra had in which she dreamt she was suckling a snake and it drew blood from her breast. On the screen now are two designs from the National Gallery's collection, one showing the twirling snake, and both showing the jaw in the position Boyd proposed. What was meant to happen of course was that when Elektra opened her legs, the jaw would open as well.



On this next slide you can see the costume that eventually was made. While it does show the snake and the jaw, the positioning of the critical element, the gaping jaw, is different. Boyd, according to Bungey, was not impressed with the changes he was asked to make. Bungey quotes Boyd as saying 'They were terrific, a bit erotic...[Helpmann] couldn't fit the choreography into the costumes...he chopped it all out and ruined my costumes.'<sup>12</sup> However, I think the changes were more dramatic once the production reached Australia, about which more soon.

I need to mention here, too, the costumes and the make-up for the Furies. The costumes consisted of purple unitards with yellow eyes positioned at breast level. The unitards extended to encompass a hood on which eyes were painted at the side at ear level. You can also see the dancers are wearing make-up and, looking closely, the actual design of the make-up is individual to each dancer. In the next image, the central figure being held upside down you will recognise is Orestes and I can't help reading Clive Barnes again here. In his wicked way he got more and more scathing as his critique continued. He wrote that the



Furies 'turn Orestes upside down to see if he keeps any loose change in his bikini, and then they kill him'.<sup>13</sup>



As for Boyd's sets, they comprised two backcloths and two side screens, which boxed in the set. On the screen now are images of the two backcloths and you get a glimpse of the side screen as well.



The lower right image is a rehearsal shot obviously. In the other you can see the open-crotch pose, on this occasion being taken by the Furies.



And on the left the left of the screen now is close-up view of one of the backcloths. It is interesting I think to look at the Furies in this slide. The effect of the eyes on the hoods, which I mentioned earlier, can be seen here. Although the Furies have their own eyes looking upwards it seems they are also looking at us. And one more thing to comment on, the pose they have taken is rather ungainly and certainly non-balletic. It fits nicely I think with Barnes' comments on Helpmann's choreography. He wrote: 'The Erinyes meanwhile have been inactive. For a good part of the time they have been lying on the ground amusing themselves—with their feet up in the air pretending to be bicycles, one wheeled bicycles.'<sup>14</sup>

The imagery Boyd used for the sets recalls ideas he was formulating in his series 'Nude with beast', a series that he had begun shortly after arriving in London. And beside the 'bicycle' image is a drawing by Boyd in brush and black ink wash from the Gallery's collection. It is entitled 'Weeping head with nude and beast' and I think shows quite clearly the connections between *Elektra* and Boyd's *Nude with Beast* series. There are connections with others of Boyd series of course and you can read further on this in the exhibition catalogue.

After the distaste with which Helpmann's staging and choreography was received Boyd was the star collaborator in *Elektra*. He won pretty much universal praise for his sets. 'The sets of Arthur Boyd, Australia's Chagall, must be seen: they are a shot in the arm', wrote Richard Buckle.<sup>15</sup> And Peter Williams was impressed that Boyd had not fallen into the trap of designing the show in terms of monumental Greek architecture. And I'll just go back here to the two Poignant images.



Williams wrote 'he has achieved a calligraphic nightmare as a surround to this turbulent dance work. It is superbly effective and immediately conveys the mental attitude of the protagonists as well as indicating the powers that control their actions...four vast canvases...on which furies and sex symbols are interlocked in a Hieronymous Bosch version of hell.'<sup>16</sup>

Boyd's costumes did not, however, receive the same kind of praise. Some of the costumes, those for Aegisthus and Orestes for example, had metallic studs on them as I mentioned earlier and Elektra also had glittering items on the bodice of her costume. One critic thought that this made the ballet look a little as though it was more like a revue than a ballet. And Helpmann also appears to have had reservations.

In 1965 Robert Helpmann became joint artistic director, with Peggy van Praagh, of the Australian Ballet. The company was still very young, having given its first performance in November 1962 and, unsurprisingly, was keen to have some Helpmann works in its repertoire. To a certain extent this had been part of the move to bring Helpmann into the company as a joint director. He was of course Australian, but he also had a big name and was a box office drawcard, and the company had been losing money on some of its early seasons. *Elektra* was ideal. It was already made and ready to go.

Just what negotiations were involved in its acquisition for the Australian Ballet is not entirely clear but and in the minutes of a meeting of the board of the Australian Ballet Foundation

on 15 February 1966, van Praagh and Helpmann reported that ‘the General Administrator of Covent Garden had arranged for the gift to the Company of the Royal Ballet production of “Elektra”. Helpmann obviously knew what was afoot though, and his unease with some of the London costumes was on his mind. Just three weeks before this board meeting at which the gift of the ballet was announced, Helpmann had sent a letter to Boyd suggesting that a change to the costumes be made, especially the purple and yellow costumes of the Furies. He wrote: ‘I would very much like to have a talk to you regarding the costumes. I have felt...we made a mistake putting the Furies in purple and feel they should be in black and white as though they were part of the décor.’<sup>17</sup>



So when Elektra finally took to the stage in Australia, the Furies were dressed in pale unitards covered with black lines, curves and swirls, which you can see on the screen now. In design, they were visually closer to Boyd’s backcloths and screens, and a make-up design drew the audience’s eye upwards from the patterns on the unitards and then on to the cloths. On the next image are two of those make-up designs worn by Colin Peasley on the left and Joseph Janusaitis on the right. Peasley and Janusaitis were two of the Australian Furies who performed on opening night at the Adelaide Festival in 1966. As had been the case with the facial make-up in England, each dancer had an individual make-up design, which they created themselves.



Boyd was not in Australia to see the Australian Ballet's production, although Helpmann sent him some reviews and comments. But the critical reception in Australia was much more polite and less analytical than that in England. The ballet itself was called 'stark and intense' and Boyd's designs were called 'eye-catching'. The ballet was short-lived in Australia and I don't think it was ever restaged by the Royal Ballet.

Boyd never did get to design a great opera, as he said he would like to do in his interview with Hal Missingham, but one strength of his work for the theatre I think is that, as British art historian, Charles Spencer, who also had a particular interest in design for the theatre has remarked, Boyd, like his colleague Sidney Nolan, was primarily a painter and he did not sacrifice his personal idiom in carrying out his theatrical commissions.<sup>18</sup>

And in finishing I'd like to thank you all for coming and say that I am happy to answer questions or take comments. I would be interested to know, too, what you think about Boyd's somewhat off-hand attitude to his theatre work, as expressed in the oral history, and also if anyone thinks Boyd was 'shirking the issue' by dressing the dancers in unitards. It



seems to me that his sets were so powerful that simplicity of costuming was almost a necessity.



## Notes

1. Deborah Hart, *Arthur Boyd. Agony and Ecstasy* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014), p. 62.
2. Peter Darrell quoted in *Dance and Dancers*, June 1963.
3. Peter Williams, 'Edinburgh's Triple Bill in London: Decor', *Dance and Dancers*, November 1961, p. 21.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Zoë Anderson, *The Royal Ballet. 75 Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 155.
7. Quoted in Kathrine Sorley Walker, *Robert Helpmann. A Rare Sense of the Theatre* (Alston: Dance Books, 2009), p. 122.
8. Clive Barnes, 'Elektra: Staging', *Dance and Dancers*, May 1963, p. 12.
9. Richard Buckle, 'Helpmann in a blaze', *The Sunday Times* (London), 31 March, 1963.
10. Darleen Bungey. *Arthur Boyd: A Life* (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007), p. 345.
11. Barnes, 'Elektra', p. 14.
12. Bungey, *Arthur Boyd*, p. 346.



13. Barnes, 'Elektra', p. 14.
14. Ibid.
15. Buckle, 'Helpmann in a blaze'.
16. Peter Williams, 'Elektra: Decor', *Dance and Dancers*, May 1963, p. 16.
17. Letter dated 25 January 1965 from Robert Helpmann to Arthur Boyd, quoted by Hart, *Arthur Boyd*, p. 81.
18. Charles Spencer, 'Australian Stage Designers in London', *Art and Australia*, December 1957, pp. 539–543.