

AUSTRALIANS ABROAD

Ballet designs by Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd

MICHELLE POTTER LOOKS AT THE WORK OF TWO AUSTRALIAN PAINTERS WORKING OVERSEAS IN THE WORLD OF THEATRE AND DANCE

THE AUSTRALIAN ART HISTORIAN Bernard Smith has pointed out that the 1960s was a significant decade in the development of Australian art. For one thing, he writes, the decade was marked by increased mobility for Australian artists, many of whom travelled overseas. Most headed for London. It was not, Smith says, because they necessarily saw Britain as the centre of the art world but because it was easier to enter the country and live there than anywhere else outside of Australia. At the same time, Australian art was being given an unprecedented amount of space in the British press and on radio and television. As another commentator notes, Australian art shown in London in the early 1960s was 'a fresh factor in [British] awareness of contemporary art'.

Of the Australians working in London at the time, the names Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd loom large. Boyd left Australia for London in November 1959. Nolan spent much of the 1950s travelling through Europe and the United States, returning frequently to England throughout that decade. In London, Nolan and Boyd often shared exhibition venues. They both had works exhibited in groundbreaking and sometimes controversial shows of Australian art in the early 1960s—*Recent Australian Art* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery and *Australian Painting: Colonial–Impressionist–Contemporary* at the Tate Gallery, for example. Both were also commissioned to design major ballet productions for the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden in the early 1960s. Nolan designed *The Rite of Spring* by British choreographer Kenneth MacMillan and Boyd accepted a commission to design *Elektra* by Australian Robert Helpmann. *The Rite of Spring* premiered on 3 May 1962, *Elektra* on 26 March 1963.

MacMillan wanted his *Rite of Spring*, set to the pulsating score by Igor Stravinsky, to have a 'tribal' element to it. He drew on a



range of sources including the recollections of Monica Mason, now artistic director of the Royal Ballet but then a relatively new member of the company, whom he selected to dance the leading role of the Chosen Maiden. Mason had spent her early childhood in South Africa and recalled joining in the 'stamping circles' of Zulu tribal dances as a child. In one memorable scene reflecting the collective tribal feeling for which MacMillan was aiming, a long, sinuous line of dancers holding each other at the hips leant back precariously as the Chosen Maiden was prepared for the sacrificial offering. The moment was vividly captured by Axel Poignant, a photographer who had migrated to Australia in the 1920s but who had also made the trip to England, his country of birth, in the 1950s.

Poignant's image of this snaking line of dancers, now part of the National Library of Australia's Pictures Collection, also shows one of two striking backcloths Nolan designed for *Rite*. For the second scene, 'The sacrifice', Nolan repurposed an image he had produced in the 1940s, *Boy and the Moon*. Composed of a large yellow disc on a 'stalk' set against a dark

ABOVE
Albert Tucker (1914–1999)
Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan,
Arthur Boyd's Studio, Hampton
Lane, London c. 1960
gelatin silver print; 40.3 cm x 30.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23609298
Courtesy Barbara Tucker

BELOW
Axel Poignant (1906–1986)
Monica Mason as the Chosen
Maiden 1962
gelatin silver print; 52 x 36.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4463950
Courtesy Roslyn Poignant





ABOVE
Axel Poignant (1906–1986)
*Rehearsal for The Rite of
Spring, Part Two The Sacrifice,*
Set and Costumes Designed by
Sidney Nolan, Covent Garden,
London 1962
gelatin silver print
25.7 x 35.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4581672
Courtesy Roslyn Poignant

blue background, the image represented the head and neck of a friend silhouetted against the moon. The elemental nature of the image was perfect for MacMillan's ballet and Nolan produced an enlarged version of it, executing the disc in gold foil from which the backing had been burnt away in order to reduce excessive glare. When lit, the disc, set against a blue-streaked sky, glowed first with a silver light representing sunrise, then with the golden haze of midday and finally with the blood red glow of sunset. Nolan's backcloths and accompanying wings were described in *The Australian Women's Weekly* as evocative of 'a prehistoric country under a glaring sun'.

But Nolan's contribution to MacMillan's *Rite of Spring*, a work that has never been performed by an Australian company, was more than just a visual backdrop. His design was an entire concept and included a floorcloth, costumes, make-up and wigs. The costumes complied with a request from MacMillan to reveal the shape of the human body, and the close-fitting bodytights that resulted were dyed in shades of ochre, red and brown. Each was painted by Nolan with stencilled hand prints, recalling aspects of the rock art of many of Australia's Indigenous communities. Nolan's work on *Rite* reflected not only his previous paintings made in Australia but also his close friendship with Poignant, which dated back to the Australia of the 1940s. In designing *The Rite of Spring*, Nolan was able to draw inspiration from

Poignant's extensive Arnhem Land photographic archive.

The Rite of Spring was Nolan's second design for a ballet. In Sydney in 1940 he had worked with Colonel Wassily de Basil's Original Ballet Russe on Serge Lifar's ballet *Icare*; in some respects, Nolan's designs for *Rite* looked back to *Icare*. The commission in 1962 allowed him to use design elements that he was unable to include in *Icare*, in which his entire initial design proposal was rejected on the grounds that it would interfere with the choreographic design. Lifar believed that dance should 'not be the designer's slave' and was singularly unimpressed with Nolan's wish to produce a design

that would be an integral part of the overall concept. Nolan was forced at the last minute to redesign the work and to dispense with the floorcloth he envisaged as part of the concept and with costumes that blended with his backcloth pattern. There was no such objection from MacMillan and Nolan's total concept for *The Rite of Spring* was exactly what he was not permitted to do with *Icare*.

Elektra was also Boyd's second design for the ballet. Shortly after arriving in London, he designed the set and costumes for a 1961 production of *Le Renard*, choreographed by South African dancer Alfred Rodrigues for the Western Theatre Ballet. Based in Bristol, the ballet company had minimal funding and Boyd had to construct most of his set—a box with a mechanical lid—without any help from the company.

But it was *Elektra*, danced by the Royal Ballet to a commissioned score from Malcolm Arnold, that showed Boyd at his most theatrical. The work was a distillation of the Greek myth in which Elektra vengefully muses on the murder of her father by her mother Clytemnestra and her mother's lover Aegisthus. The ballet writer Richard Buckle wrote after opening night:

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 witchlike with streaming vermilion hair,

gloating over her avenging axe, is Elektra ... The sets of Arthur Boyd, Australia's Chagall, must be seen: they are a shot in the arm.

The sets, which included backcloths and side screens, drew on ideas Boyd was formulating in his series *Nude with Beast*, a series that he had begun shortly after arriving in London. To the cloths and screens Boyd added the scarlet floorcloth mentioned by Buckle. The overpowering effect of Boyd's designs, when enlarged to the size of the Covent Garden stage, was captured by Poignant in another series of photographs held in the Library's Pictures Collection.

What makes these particular images by Poignant especially interesting for the historical record is that they document Boyd's costumes, or at least their vestiges. Boyd had ideas to dress the eight male Furies, or Avengers of the Dead, in purple costumes with yellow eyes located at breast level and hoods with faces painted on the back. Clytemnestra's costume was to be decorated with a swirling snake with head and jaws located above the groin. The visual effect was clearly meant to be erotic, in keeping with Helpmann's blatantly sexual choreography that many considered to be vulgar, crude and suggestive. However, the original designs were altered to be less graphic. Boyd is reputed to have remarked that his costumes were 'ruined'. But his designs (and the entire production) nevertheless caused a sensation.

Even in their watered-down form, Boyd's costumes were never seen in Australia. They

were completely revised in 1966 when, as a gift to the Australian Ballet from the Royal Opera House, *Elektra* entered the repertoire of the Australian Ballet. The Australian Furies were dressed in pale bodytights covered with black lines, curves and swirls and were visually closer to Boyd's finely drawn backcloth images. A make-up design drew the eye upwards from the patterns on the bodytights. The Poignant images give a rare glimpse of what the British public saw at Covent Garden, while images of the make-up by Walter Stringer from the Australian Ballet production allow us to compare and contrast.

British art historian Charles Spencer writes that Nolan and Boyd were not professionals in the work they did for the theatre, basing this statement on the fact that, unlike other Australians working in the theatre in London in the 1960s, such as Loudon Sainthill, Kenneth Rowell and Barry Kay, Nolan and Boyd were 'primarily painters'. He has also remarked, perhaps more astutely, that both artists showed no sacrifice of their 'personal idioms' in their ballet designs. But both Nolan and Boyd also continued the great tradition, so closely associated with Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, of painters working in the theatre and contributing in a way that was bold and challenging.

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BELOW LEFT
Axel Poignant (1906–1986)
Arthur Boyd and Robert
Helpmann in Front of the
Elektra Backdrop, Covent
Garden, London 1963
gelatin silver print
39.9 x 27.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4463730
Courtesy Roslyn Poignant

BELOW RIGHT
Axel Poignant (1906–1986)
Dancers Rehearse Elektra in
Front of the Daphne Backdrop
Designed by Arthur Boyd,
Covent Garden, London 1963
gelatin silver print
19.8 x 30.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4463886
Courtesy Roslyn Poignant

