

Documenting Australian Dance

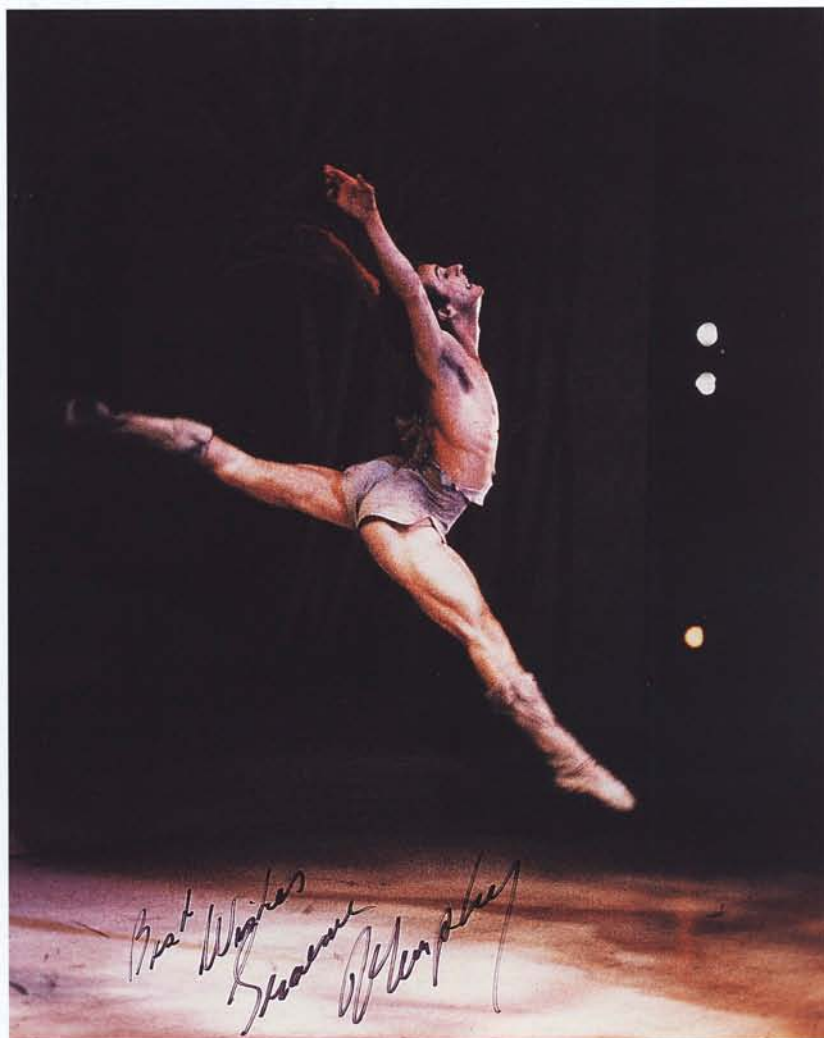
Walter Stringer's Dance Photography

In the second of a series of articles looking at recent additions to the National Library's dance holdings as part of the Keep Dancing! project, Michelle Potter delves into the W.F. Stringer Collection and discovers a man with a passion for dance

Walter Stringer, pioneer Australian dance photographer, still remembers the first professional dance performance he ever saw. It was a triple bill by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company. He saw it in London at the Coliseum Theatre and on the program was Michel Fokine's exotic and glamorous *Schéhérazade*. The year was about 1919 and he was just a young boy, but the memory of that performance haunts him to this day. He still thinks of it as the most memorable production he has ever seen.

Stringer, born in 1907 in a suburb of Dublin, Ireland, did not take his first dance photographs until he migrated to Australia with his family when he was 16. His parents set up house in Melbourne and Stringer's first photographs were taken secretly from the stalls in a Melbourne theatre in 1940 during performances by Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes company. They marked the beginning of Stringer's long documentation of dance.

Only those early shots had to be taken surreptitiously, however. After that, the quality of his work, and his generous and undemanding nature, meant that he was made welcome by most dance companies. Stringer, who was a bank clerk for his entire working life, frequented Melbourne dance studios and theatres, often dashing out of the bank in his lunch hour to take his photographs. He



was allowed backstage during performances and often also shot from the auditorium during dress rehearsals.

Stringer's output as a photographer, now housed in the National Library as the W.F. Stringer Collection, is one of the Library's largest photographic collections. It consists of several thousand images in the form of photographic prints and transparencies, and represents a 50-year panorama of contemporary, classical and folk dance in Australia. While very few of those early, secretly taken photographs survive, his images nevertheless reveal the development of Australian dance from the 1940s onwards. Stringer photographed all major Australian companies,

Walter Stringer (b. 1907)
Graeme Murphy in *Daphnis and Chloe*
cibachrome photograph; 25.3 x 20.1 cm
(P554/SD/22)
W.F. Stringer Collection
From the Pictorial Collection

including the Borovansky Ballet, Ballet Guild, Ballet Victoria, Sydney Dance Company, National Theatre Ballet Company, Australian Dance Theatre, West Australian Ballet, and a host of others.

His collection also highlights the touring dance companies that brought a vast array of dance styles to Australia from the late 1950s onwards. Stringer

took, for example, some inspiring images of productions by New York City Ballet. That company visited in 1958 and brought to Australia works that looked astonishingly different from the Russian and English repertoire on which audiences had been brought up during the 1940s and 1950s. There was the work of George Balanchine, from the American glitz of his *Stars and Stripes* to the neoclassicism of his *Concerto Barocco*. There were works by Jerome Robbins, including his sensuously beautiful *Afternoon of a Faun*. Australians had seen nothing like it. Stringer also documented the several visits in the 1960s and 1970s by Luisillo and his Spanish dance company. Luisillo and his dancers and musicians produced some of the most passionate dance and music—flamenco style—that Australians had seen.

Stringer's collection, in fact, questions the notion that Australia was culturally isolated during the middle decades of the twentieth century. His images attest to the fact that Australian dance audiences at least were not isolated from developments elsewhere. The Georgian State Dance Company with their fiery Cossack dances, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater with

its African American heritage, a colourful Ballet Folklorico from Mexico, a host of companies from the Asian region, including India, Sri Lanka, China and the Philippines, and many contemporary dance companies from across America and Europe bombarded audiences with new experiences.

Perhaps the largest component in the W.F. Stringer Collection is material relating to the Australian Ballet. Those photographs and transparencies date from the company's first Melbourne season in early 1963 and cover every major production of the flagship company until the 1990s. They include shots of major new pieces commissioned from Australian choreographers—Helpmann's *Display*, *Yugen* and *Sun Music*, for example—as well as the classics mounted by the company across the decades. Some of the most exquisite of Stringer's images record Anne Woolliams's production of *Swan Lake*, originally made for the Australian Ballet in the 1970s. With his *Swan Lake* photographs, Stringer captured both the classicism of that production, with its emphasis on highly-structured choreography for the corps de ballet, and the dramatic, Gothic nature of its narrative.

Stringer's Australian Ballet photographs also record many of the larger-than-life personalities who have been associated with the company over its almost 40 years of existence. There are the star Australian dancers, the visiting guest artists, the teachers, the choreographers and the directors—artists who range from the flamboyant Robert Helpmann, whose associations with the company were as director, choreographer and performer, to the delicate Russian ballerina Galina Ulanova. In the 1980s, Ulanova came to coach the Australian Ballet dancers in *Giselle*, to pass on her knowledge of a ballet that was for many her greatest triumph during her own long and distinguished performing career with Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet.

Although he photographed all dance styles, Stringer seemed

Walter Stringer (b. 1907)
*Anne Woolliams and Corps de Ballet in
 Swan Lake, Australian Ballet 1977*
 35mm slide
 W.F. Stringer Collection
 From the Pictorial Collection





(above) Walter Stringer (b. 1907)
*Dame Margot Fonteyn with Kelvin Coe
 and John Meehan in the Australian Ballet's
 Production of The Merry Widow 1977*
 cibachrome photograph; 20 x 25.3 cm
 (P554/AB/26)
 W.F. Stringer Collection
 From the Pictorial Collection



(left) Walter Stringer (b. 1907)
Spanish Dancer, Luisillo
 35mm slide
 W.F. Stringer Collection
 From the Pictorial Collection
 Luisillo's passionate flamenco-style
 dancing dazzled Australian audiences in
 the 1960s and 1970s

especially fond of ballet as a genre of dance. Some of his most alluring shots are of the acclaimed ballet dancers Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova, who were enticed to Australia in 1975 at the height of their performing careers to dance with Ballet Victoria. Makarova danced *The Dying Swan* and she and Baryshnikov

performed the leading roles in the second act of *Giselle*. Stringer captured it all, from Makarova's delicate and ethereal qualities to Baryshnikov's sensuality and complete absorption in his role.

There are, however, many features of the W.F. Stringer Collection that make it more than a documentary record of dance in Australia from the

1940s to the 1990s. Stringer rarely took posed shots. 'Dance is movement through space' was a motto for him and he aimed to capture the moment of performance. As a result, not all of his photographs show the dancers in their most elegant or flattering moments. Stringer was aware of this and would frequently show his photographs to his subjects and ask them to autograph those they especially liked. Some of his personal favourites are photographs he took of Dame Margot Fonteyn when she visited Australia in 1977 to perform in the Australian Ballet's production of *The Merry Widow*. With exacting standards, Fonteyn rarely allowed photographers to work during her performances. Stringer is immensely proud that not only did she allow him in the wings while she was dancing, but she thought highly enough of his work to autograph some of his prints.

Stringer was also fond of collating his shots into mini collections. He occasionally assembled albums of photographs relating to a particular tour



(above) Walter Stringer (b. 1907)
Portrait of Sir Robert Helpmann
35mm slide
W.F. Stringer Collection
From the Pictorial Collection

(left) Walter Stringer
Self-Portrait
photograph; 25.3 x 20.3 cm
W.F. Stringer Collection
From the Pictorial Collection

or company. The tour by Ballet Rambert to Australia in the 1940s has been accorded an album, as has the Royal Ballet tour of 1958. But he also gathered assorted transparencies into themes for special showings to family and friends—including, occasionally, groups of dancers who would come to

his home on weekends for his special slide evenings. He took, for example, a collection of close-up shots of dancers made up for ballets that required especially dramatic facial make-up, calling this series *Men and Makeup*. He was also fond of the activities that went on backstage, activities that involved not just dancers but backstage

personnel as well. Another of his miniseries is called *On and Off Stage*, and another *Balletomania*. And Stringer always added his personal touches to these collections by making a title for each series, always designed with the theme of the particular collection in mind. He did the same with a closing slide, which always read 'The End'.

The W.F. Stringer Collection was made by a man who simply loved dance as an art form. He loved all the backstage drama and all the onstage glitter. He was fascinated by the tiniest details—the pots in the paint frame, the different kinds of shoes worn by dancers, a tangle of feet at rest, faces filled with concentration. Stringer's material is invaluable as a record of Australia's dancing heritage. It is also a record of one man's devotion to and fascination with dance in its many and varied facets.

The W.F. Stringer Collection is currently being processed as part of the Keep Dancing! project, an Australia Council funded partnership between the Library, ScreenSound Australia and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance). As sorting and identification is completed, the collection will gradually become available for research and reference through the Library's Pictorial Collection.

Stringer was interviewed for the Library's Oral History Collection in 1994 and the interview (TRC 3010) is part of the Esso Performing Arts and Oral History Archive Project.

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