

Most Australian publishers are reluctant to publish dance books. I have frequently wondered why this is so. Is it the quality of dance writing in this country? Are there perceptions that dance has nothing to offer the wider arts community? Is there a financial issue? Do publishers know how and where to promote dance? Does the dance community care?

With all these and other issues in mind I read the most recent Australian dance publication, *Australian Dances: Creating Australian Dance 1945–1965*, a substantial book written by Alan Brissenden and Keith Glennon and published by the independent, Adelaide-based company, Wakefield Press. My first thought is to congratulate Wakefield Press for having the strength and courage to go against the tide and publish this book. I hope it makes money for them.

As for the book itself, I have to say first up that, with one or two minor hiccups, it is a beautifully produced and designed publication. The paper is smooth to the touch and sets off the text in a pleasing way and the choice of a golden ochre colour for headings and other decorative touches complements the beautifully reproduced photographs, which when not in full colour have a sepia tinge to them. The illustrations are outstanding from a dance point of view and so many of them are new to the Australian dance public, having been kept in the Keith Glennon Collection at the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide pending the publication of this book. In addition to photographs, the illustrations include costume and set designs, drawings and paintings by Kenneth Rowell, William Constable, Barry Kay, Elaine Haxton, Eve King, Nina Brabant, Marie Cumisky, Ruth Shackel, Wayne Fleming and Harald Vike. As documentation of a particular period of dance creation in Australia, it is a gem of new visual information.

The book first deals with the work of three ballet companies that might be considered national – the Borovansky Ballet, the National Theatre Ballet Company and the Australian Ballet – before going on to cover state initiatives, large and small. Modern dance, ethnic dance and touring separate



Left, Bodenwiesser's *The Wheel of Life*, with Coralie Hinkley, Mardi Watchorn and Eileen Cramer.
Photo: J. R. T. Richardson, Richard McKinney Studios

Bottom, Edna Busse, the first full principal of the Borovansky Ballet.
Photo: Peter Fox.

Dancing onto our bookshelves

A new history of Australian dance in the two decades after World War II shows the richness of creativity in the era, **Michelle Potter** writes



sections and examining organisations and eisteddfods have a few pages at the end.

Australia Dances purports to cover only a small period of time, the two decades from 1945 to 1965, although in practice it often includes information prior to 1945 (although rarely after 1965). Brissenden has used the main introduction, the opening sections to individual chapters and a page on resources to place the main agenda of the book in perspective and to give it a little context.

The book is, however, somewhat inconsistent in how the material is structured. Some sections give a useful, if brief analysis of particular dance works, which is more than the basic facts of what

happened when and where. The section dealing with small ballet companies active in Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s is a case in point. Here we are privy to the perceptive words and contemporary thoughts of someone (probably Brissenden in this case) who was present at performances. We can read, for example, of Laurel Martyn's choreography for her groundbreaking work *Mathinna*, made for Ballet Guild in 1954:

"The choreography was designed to convey the powerful dramatic content of the ballet rather than to provide a spectacle in itself. Each movement gave point to characterisation or developed the action of the story. Especially notable were the hand

and arm movements given to the women. In the first scene, for instance, *Mathinna* had a delighted, free-playing movement of the hand which echoed her native origin and expressed her happiness, while the bondage and resentment of the convict women were expressed by clenched hands and crossed wrists."

Many of us have never seen Martyn's *Mathinna* and most likely never will, so such a passage gives a feel for what the work looked like on stage. The voice of Glennon surfaces, I suspect, in the section on ethnic dance where there are some revealing passages on the dances performed in 1963 by a group called Aboriginal Theatre.

Sadly, other sections do not contain such analysis and consist simply of a paragraph or two of basic historical information. This inconsistency is no doubt a reflection of where Brissenden and Glennon were in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is frustrating to have a strong personal voice in some sections and not in others.

But what ultimately emerges from the material presented in *Australia Dances* is the richness of creativity in Australian dance before the advent of government subsidies. The book reveals the passion and determination of those creators who made dance without grants, and of the dancers who performed new works while holding down "day jobs" and rehearsing at nights and on weekends. An amazing number of organisations working in this way existed across Australia in the two decades covered by this book. They provided a strong, home-grown basis for future developments.

Australia Dances is a welcome addition to what is a sparse Australian publishing scene as far as monographs on Australian dance are concerned. The book largely covers old ground but it brings together in a single publication material that is scattered across the continent, often in hard-to-access archives.

It also brings into focus how much still remains to be written.

■ *Australia Dances: Creating Australian Dance 1945–1965*. By Alan Brissenden and Keith Glennon. Wakefield Press. 270pp. \$70.

