

Pushing 50 but still dancing

Next year the Australian Ballet will celebrate its first five decades with several new Australian works, **Michelle Potter** writes

The Australian Ballet recently announced its 2012 season and, for the first time in some years, the news is cause for a bit of excitement and anticipation. It will be the company's 50th anniversary year and for any Australian performing arts company to have survived for half a century is a remarkable achievement. So, that the season seems to have some promising features is a good start to the next phase of the company's growth.

The highlight of the season is not so much any individual work but the fact that Australian choreography is being strongly promoted. New works for the company will come from Graeme Murphy, Stephen Page, Gideon Obarzanek, Tim Harbour and the company's current resident choreographer, Stephen Baynes. New choreography is the lifeblood of any dance company and, in a historically significant year, there is good reason to celebrate home-grown artists such as Baynes, Harbour, Murphy, Obarzanek and Page.

Murphy, Obarzanek and Page will each create a new, as yet unnamed work for a triple bill called *Infinity*. Murphy will draw inspiration from the extremes of the Australian landscape and climate. Page's work, a collaboration between the Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre, will focus on an indigenous story associated with the evening star. Obarzanek, who has just relinquished the reins of Melbourne's Chunky Move, will use one of the individualistic research methods he developed while directing that company. He will survey a range of people and ask them, "What is ballet?" To create the work Obarzanek will draw inspiration from the responses he receives. It is likely to be a unique addition to the Australian Ballet's repertoire.

This triple bill is being promoted in subscriber brochures and media material as the work of "the triple threat of Australian dance". The prospect of being threatened by Murphy, Page and Obarzanek is definitely something to look forward to and I can't wait.

Murphy gets another guernsey when the Australian Ballet revives *Beyond Twelve*, which the company originally commissioned from him in 1980. *Beyond Twelve* will join Robert Helpmann's *Display* (1964) and Glen Tetley's *Gemini* (1973) in a second triple bill entitled *Icons*.

Murphy's *Beyond Twelve* is one of his most affecting works. Inspired by his dance colleagues, it looks at the life and loves of a young boy growing up and maturing as a dancer. It is in stark contrast to the contemporary, stripped back abstraction of *Gemini* and the brashness and Helpmann-esque theatricality of *The Display*. It will be especially interesting to see how *The Display* stands up in 2012. With its overt sexuality and its examination of the behaviour of the Aussie male, it



Madeleine Eastoe and Kevin Jackson.

Photo: Georges Antoni.

was something of a shock to many in the 1960s.

The Australian Ballet opened its very first season in Sydney in November 1962 with a production of *Swan Lake*. In 2012 Stephen Baynes, working with artistic director David McAllister, will revisit *Swan Lake* and create a new version of this classic story. Graeme Murphy's much admired new take on *Swan Lake*, made in 2002, will apparently remain in the repertoire and will be shown in New York in June. While I'm not sure how many versions of *Swan Lake* are necessary in any one company at any one time, there will always be a place for a new version in traditional style. Baynes' narrative works to date have been intelligently and provocatively thought through and, while Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is unlikely to be Baynes' starting point, I hope the sense of Gothic brooding contained in that novel will be part of his thinking.

Although Tim Harbour may not yet have the name that his choreographic colleagues in Australia have developed, he is fast moving towards that kind of

recognition. Harbour, whose dance training included several years in Canberra, made his choreographic debut in 2005 with *Sunken Waltz* and since then has made dances for companies across Australia and around the world. His contribution to the season will be a new work featuring former Australian Ballet principal Steven Heathcote and his daughter Mia who is now training at the Australian Ballet School. It will be part of a program called *Let's Dance*, which will include contributions from all major Australian dance companies. *Let's Dance* will showcase the current diversity of Australian mainstream dance, a diversity that certainly did not exist 50 years ago.

The Australian Ballet will also celebrate its 50th birthday with a special international gala in November when guest artists from companies in Europe and America will perform with the company. A special feature of this gala will be a revival of Harald Lander's *Etudes*, a work beloved by the company's former but to date longest-serving artistic director, Maina Gielgud. Gielgud introduced *Etudes* to the company repertoire in 1986. Completing the year's program are John Cranko's *Onegin* (1965), and Murphy's *Romeo and Juliet*, which will premiere this month in Melbourne, go on to Sydney in December and travel to other Australian cities for the 2012 season.

The Australian Ballet has an abysmal record as far as recent appearances in Canberra are concerned. Next year, however, the city does get a look-in,

although exactly what audiences will see remains unclear. *Telstra Ballet in the Park*, the company's annual, free outdoor event, will take place on Stage 88 in Commonwealth Park on March 16. By that time the Murphy/Page/Obarzanek triple bill will have had its Melbourne opening so perhaps we might see that as all three choreographers have fans in Canberra. We have been watching their works at the Canberra Theatre Centre over an extended period – beginning in the 1960s in the case of Murphy. There is a ready-made audience.

Those interested in the growth of ballet in Australia will still need to travel to Sydney or Melbourne to gain the most from the anniversary season. But in 2012 at least the worst of the frothy stuff has been omitted. There is the promise of a variety of new Australian choreography and the prospect of seeing some works that were indeed iconic in their time.

• For season dates in Sydney and Melbourne see the Australian Ballet's website www.australianballet.com.au/