

The fire and the rose

Valrene Tweedie, OAM:
29 March 1925 – 4 August 2008

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Valrene Tweedie, who died in Sydney on 4 August 2008, appeared as an extra with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet during its Sydney seasons, 1938–1939. It was the responsibility of company member Edouard Borovansky, who would later go on to establish the Borovansky Ballet in Australia, to hire and rehearse the extras for their appearances. When at the end of that tour Valrene was collecting autographs for her souvenir program, he wrote: 'To dear Valrene, for memory and example of hard work, Edward Borovansky'.

Tweedie, with the humility that marked her life, always said that her acceptance in 1940 into the Original Ballet Russe, the company that followed the Covent Garden Russian Ballet to Australia, was because she had a good memory and was a quick thinker. In an oral history interview conducted for the National Library of Australia in 1988 she added: 'I think I had an ability for copying and faking and if the group was going to the right I seemed to be able to manage to go to the right with them'.¹ Again with typical humility she never commented on how hard she worked in and for dance, which she did throughout her life, and there are major parts of her career that are still little known to Australians. Her work with Sergei Denham's company, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (or the 'One and Only Ballet Russe'), and her work in Cuba are just two areas that await further research. But Borovansky's words were perceptive and Tweedie's Australian Dance Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1998 was richly deserved.

The story of Tweedie's acceptance by Colonel Wassily de Basil into the Original Ballet Russe in Sydney in 1940 and her performances as a member of the company before it left Australia for the United States are well known to the Australian dance world. A series of tiny (8.5 x 6.0 cm) sepia-toned photos of her taken by Melbourne photographer E. A. Rowell document many of the roles she was given. Rowell, Tweedie said, would be backstage and catch her as she headed towards the stage and ask her to pose informally. She would later buy prints from him as a memento of those early experiences. They were also on sale to the public and many found their way into personal albums compiled by fans.

Tweedie left Australia with the Original Ballet Russe in September 1940 aboard the Matson liner the *Monterey* to begin her career as a professional dancer. Still only 15 and under the guardianship of Nina Verchinina, much admired principal dancer with the company, she was initially overcome by the enormity of what was happening. 'When the *Monterey*, the ship we sailed on from Walsh Bay on 20 September 1940, went under the Sydney Harbour Bridge I was so overcome that I wondered what I had done. So I went down to my cabin and I cried my eyes out', she said in an interview in 1999.² But despite the initial emotion, she knew

she had made the right move: 'Once I had the opportunity to travel with the de Basil company, I never had any other thought than that was what I'd do for the rest of my life', she recalled.³

With the de Basil company, she travelled across America and into Canada, toured through South America, and was stranded in Cuba in 1941 during the infamous strike by the de Basil dancers over what was ostensibly an issue concerning salaries. All this time Tweedie was largely dancing the repertoire that Australians had seen between 1936 and 1940.

In 1942, at the British Consulate in Buenos Aires, Tweedie, aged just 17, married fellow de Basil dancer, the Cuban Luis Trapaga. Together they led a peripatetic dancer's life touring and performing between Cuba and the Americas. As Tweedie's photo albums indicate, they also enjoyed the friendship of fellow dancers and Trapaga's extended family and social networks.

It was in Cuba that Tweedie began to teach, a career that she would ultimately pursue in her later life. She taught at the Pro-Arte studios in Havana over two distinct periods, 1944–1946 and 1950–1951. She also worked closely with the Alonso family – Alicia and her husband Fernando and Alberto, Fernando's brother who had danced in Australia with the de Basil company – as they began their efforts to establish a Cuban national ballet school and company. On programs for the Ballet Alicia Alonso in the 1940s Tweedie is billed as a guest artist, and on programs from the early 1950s for the Alonso's Ballet Nacional she is billed not only as a dancer but also as *régisseur-général*, and she is credited with staging a significant proportion of the repertoire. The Cuban experiences both with Pro-Arte and the Alonso family were vital for the direction her life would take when later she returned to Australia. She recalled:

it was a very exciting time and a very formative time for me both in learning to teach and produce and reproduce choreography... I would say that it had a tremendous influence on my life, all that time in Cuba.⁴

Tweedie had left the de Basil company not long after her marriage and from 1946 to 1950, in between her various Cuban experiences, she danced with Sergei Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, as did Trapaga.

Again they toured across the United States and Canada. In large part, the repertoire of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo was quite different from that of the de Basil company, its growth and development having taken a very different path.⁵ Consequently, Tweedie learnt a new repertoire and came into contact with different choreographers. It was while with the Denham company that Tweedie danced in a series of ballets choreographed by George Balanchine which included *Raymonda*, *Ballet Imperial*, *Le baiser de la fée*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Danses Concertantes* and *Balustrade*. She scored particular success as the lead dancer in the Czardas from *Raymonda* in which she was partnered by George Verdak.

In Montreal in 1949 one review commented: 'The Czardas... was led by Valrene Tweedie and George Verdak, who danced with spirit and visualized the exciting gaiety of the Hungarian national rhythms'. Then, during an engagement in Tennessee in 1950, a reviewer wrote: "'Czardas" danced by Valrene Tweedie and George Verdak, was dynamic, full of fire and speed and showing again beautiful

Valrene Tweedie and George Verdak as the leading couple in the Czardas from 'Raymonda', Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (c. 1946)
Photo: Maurice Seymour
Courtesy: Michelle Potter



technique'.⁶ Tweedie's admiration for Balanchine remained with her for life and had her visa situation been different she may well have auditioned for Balanchine as he was forming New York City Ballet. In 2004 she recalled:

I didn't have a working permit to stay in America, in the United States. I only had a permit for the length of the contract. So when the contract was up and we had the holidays I had to leave the United States; whether I went to Canada or whether I went to Cuba didn't matter. I was allowed to return only with another contract for whatever it was, nine or ten months or so many weeks. And, when Mr B was forming New York City Ballet, he couldn't offer contracts. He could only offer the season of work, you know, four or five weeks. And a lot of the people who worked with him at that time, they'd have to go on social security or something in between times, so I could not have done that at that time.⁷

With the Denham company Tweedie was also in contact with choreographers, including Agnes de Mille and Ruth Page, who were working to develop an American dance idiom and vocabulary. She danced in Page's *Frankie and Johnny* and in de Mille's *Rodeo*, including performing the role of the Rancher's Daughter in *Rodeo* to de Mille's Cow Girl on opening night of the work's New York season. Her experiences of rehearsing and performing with de Mille would clearly feed into her own Australian works in later years with *Ranch House* for a National

Theatre Ballet workshop in 1955 and *Wakooka* for the Elizabethan Opera Ballet in 1957.

In 1952 Tweedie returned to Australia and in 1953 became third artistic director of the Melbourne-based National Theatre Ballet. For the National she worked tirelessly to keep the company vibrant and viable – staging several ballets with which she was familiar from the de Basil repertoire, choreographing her own works for the company, establishing a program of workshops and, towards the end of her term as artistic director, developing a schools' program. But by 1955 the National was in decline as a professional company and Tweedie joined the cast of the Cole Porter musical *Can-Can* with her American friend from the Denham days, Eleonore Treiber, who had been brought to Australia by the J. C. Williamson organisation to stage the choreography. Treiber danced the leading role of Claudine as well as directing the dances. Tweedie herself played the small speaking part of an artist's model in addition to dancing in the chorus and, according to the press, performing a can-can 16 times a week!⁸

Subsequently Tweedie went on to choreograph for Tivoli revues and for the Elizabethan Opera Ballet Company. Her most significant choreographic work, *Wakooka*, was made for the latter company in 1957. Set on a sheep station 'somewhere in present day Australia' as the program note stated, *Wakooka* was accompanied by a score for two pianos commissioned from John Antill and had designs by Elaine Haxton. In *Wakooka* Tweedie began to experiment with

Valrene Tweedie (sitting on the 'fence') in the J.C. Williamson production of 'Can Can' (1955)
Photographer: unknown
Courtesy: Michelle Potter



movement that might express an Australian experience just as Page, de Mille and the Alonso family had worked to find an idiom for their own experiences.

Tweedie returned permanently to her home city of Sydney in 1956 and began full-time teaching, taking over a studio that had been started by Phyllida Cooper, the Australian dancer who performed with the de Basil company as Lydia Couprina, and James Uphaw, an American dancer and, at the time, Cooper's husband. Tweedie taught her student classes according to the Cecchetti system of training but her studio in Little Regent Street close to Sydney's Central station was a mecca for professional dancers. By the 1960s, whenever The Australian Ballet was in town for its Sydney season, her 6 pm classes would often be filled by dancers from that company.

Tweedie's classes were long and demanding. At the *barre* she would often set what she called '*Danilova grands battements*', a variation on the standard *grand battement* in which the leg would return to a *cou de pied* position instead of fifth. And indeed Tweedie had worked with Alexandra Danilova in the United States when Danilova had been a principal with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Tweedie's background in the Cecchetti system meant that centre practice and adage were gruelling. Her classes were, however, especially remarkable for the *grand allegro* sequences that came at the end of every class. She often said that her penchant for this kind of exercise could be traced back to the fact that throughout her career she had been taught largely by men. They included one of her earliest teachers in Australia, Mischa Burlakov, and the charismatic Russian teachers who taught for the Ballets Russes companies.

In 1960 Tweedie founded Ballet Australia to encourage the creation of new choreography and this small, largely unfunded organisation continued for 17 years to provide an environment for experimentation by Australians working across a variety of dance styles from ballet to jazz, modern to primitive. Her leadership in encouraging broadly based choreographic development in the 1960s and 1970s remains one of her most remarkable achievements. Tweedie was a visionary in this regard and even today her broad outlook has rarely been equalled. She was a facilitator who provided artists with a creative environment in which to experiment and to grow. Ballet Australia gave its first performance on 17 December 1960 at Sydney's Conservatorium of Music. Four works were shown: Tweedie's *Overture for Dancers*, Ruth Galene's *Cantilena*, Judith Burgess' *Bartok Sonata* and Joan Halliday's *Sea Interludes*. The early seasons were full-scale productions and the period 1961 to 1962 was particularly productive musically. In three seasons, eight dance works were produced, using music by contemporary Australian composers. Six of the eight works were danced to brand new scores commissioned by Ballet Australia from John Antill, Nigel Butterley, Kurt Herweg, Bruce Lawrence, Richard Meale and John Milful.

The organisation was financially unable to maintain its commitment to full-scale productions and by 1964 Ballet Australia performances were presented in the form of choreographic workshops. The first workshop, held on 31 May 1964 at Sydney's Cell Block Theatre, comprised *Growing Pains* by Ken Mansfield, *Concerto Grosso* by Keith Bain, *Isomorphisms* by Judith Burgess, *Encounter* by Ruth Galene, and *The Consuming Flame* by Brian Hokin. In 1969 Ballet Australia ran its first choreographic competition, which was won by Nanette Hassall with a work entitled *Solus* performed to music by Peter Sculthorpe. The choreographic competitions continued during the 1970s and winners in subsequent years were

Jeffa Nicholson (*If you hold on too tight – it's gone*, 1970), Cathryn Short (*Movement for Four*, 1971), Christine Koltai (*Asylum*, 1972), Ian Spink (*Figurescape*, 1973), Arthur Turnbull (*Sparesil-nom*, 1974) and Ian Spink (*Duet*, 1976). In 1973 the organisation also ran its first choreographic seminar, which was led by tutors Franz Vervenne from Nederlands Dans Theater, Ray Cook from Australian Dance Theatre and Garth Welch from The Australian Ballet.

Tweedie retired from full-time teaching in 1985 but remained involved with the Cecchetti Society for the rest of her life, teaching frequently at the Society's annual summer schools. She returned to the stage in 1992 as Clara the Elder in the premiere season of Graeme Murphy's *Nutcracker* for The Australian Ballet, winning warm praise for the gentle humanity she brought to the role. She also appeared in revivals of the work in 1994 and 2000 and was cast by Stephen Baynes in *Requiem* in 2001, also for The Australian Ballet. More recently she worked with her colleagues from the early Ballets Russes days, Irina Baronova and Anna Volkova, to stage *Les Sylphides* for the Australian Ballet.

Valrene Tweedie was my teacher and I danced in some of her productions for Ballet Australia. She was also my friend and I have wonderful memories of sitting up till very late at night and into the morning on more than one occasion in her home in Double Bay, Sydney, each of us with a glass of red wine, talking endlessly about dance. The second last time I saw her she was still speaking in her forthright manner from a bed in the Sacred Heart Hospice in Sydney about the state of dance in Australia, and counting up the number of speeches she had made from the stage of the Cell Block Theatre during the years that Ballet Australia was performing there. Coincidentally, the Cell Block, part of the old Darlinghurst Gaol complex, was directly opposite the hospice.

The last time I saw her it was very close to the end and there were no more words just a wild yet somehow extraordinarily beautiful look in her eyes: 'The fire and the rose are one.'⁹

NOTES

- ¹ Valrene Tweedie, oral history interview with Valrene Tweedie conducted by Michelle Potter, 7 November (1988), TRC 2347, National Library of Australia.
- ² Valrene Tweedie, interview in *The Ballets Russes in Australia 1936–1940: An Avalanche of Dancing*, video documentary, National Film and Sound Archive and National Library of Australia (1999).
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Valrene Tweedie, oral history interview with Valrene Tweedie conducted by Michelle Potter, 7 & 8 December (2004), TRC 5350, National Library of Australia.
- ⁵ The history of Denham's company is the subject of Jack Anderson's work *The one and only: the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1981).
- ⁶ The *Montreal Daily Star*, 6 April (1949), p. 32; Unidentified newspaper clipping, Knoxville, Tennessee, February (1950).
- ⁷ Valrene Tweedie, oral history interview (2004).
- ⁸ 'They dance can-can 16 times', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 10 May (1956), p. 19.
- ⁹ T.S Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Four Quartets* (1943).