

In 2006 The Dancers Company of The Australian Ballet presents a captivating triple bill: Les Sylphides, The Sleeping Beauty Act 3 and Graduation Ball. These three works represent three different moods and styles of dancing. Les Sylphides is an abstract fantasy, a poetic reverie; The Sleeping Beauty Act 3 is a classic with its parade of fairytale characters who celebrate the wedding of Princess Aurora and her prince; and Graduation Ball is a show-off piece, a funfilled romp that delights and charms all ages.

But despite the diverse qualities that characterise each of the works, all three ballets have one thing in common. All were seen by Australian ballet audiences between 1936 and 1940 when Colonel de Basil's legendary Ballets Russes companies toured Australia. Three companies came to Australia over those four years and Australian audiences were treated to theatricality and spectacle on a scale that they had not experienced before. Over 40 new and invigorating productions were staged between 1936 and 1940, all with brilliant choreography, music and design from the leading Russian and European artists of the day. Les Sylphides, The Sleeping Beauty Act 3 and Graduation Ball were amongst the most popular works in this repertoire.

Les Sylphides was the favourite opening ballet during Ballets Russes seasons and was in fact the very first ballet to take the stage when the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, the first of the touring companies, opened its season in Adelaide in October 1936. It was also the ballet most frequently performed over the course of the following four years.

The Sleeping Beauty Act 3 was also shown during that first Adelaide season and remained a show piece for the company's star ballerinas. Acclaimed interpreters of the role of Princess Aurora included Valentina Blinova on the 1936/7 tour by the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, Irina Baronova on the 1938/9 tour by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, and Tamara Toumanova on the final tour by the Original Ballet Russe in 1939/40.

Graduation Ball was choreographed in Australia by David Lichine. It had an exciting and well received world premiere in Sydney in March 1940. It starred Lichine himself and his wife Tatiana Riabouchinska who, like Irina Baronova and Tamara Toumanova, was one of the 'baby ballerinas', so called because they began their professional careers as dancers while still in their early teens.

Tours to Australia by Ballets Russes companies marked a watershed in the cultural life of Australia. Local artists rejoiced in the opportunity to learn firsthand about European high art, and the collaborative works nurtured by de Basil and his predecessor, Serge Diaghilev. Many local artists were inspired by what they saw and heard during performances and went on to work in theatre themselves. The artist Sidney Nolan is one of the best known examples. He made his first work for the theatre for de Basil's Original Ballet Russe in 1940 when he made sets and costumes for Icare choreographed by Serge Lifar. After this experience of designing for the Original Ballet Russe, Nolan went on to make many more theatrical designs including Rite of Spring for The Royal Ballet in 1962 and The Display for The Australian Ballet in 1964. Acclaimed photographer Max Dupain also worked with the Ballets Russes dancers. His collection of portraits of the dancers at work and play is unsurpassed. Many other artists working across artistic disciplines were inspired by Ballets Russes performances to draw, paint, photograph, choreograph and compose. The tours were truly influential in the development of the arts in Australia.

But if Australians were fascinated by the brilliant repertoire they flocked to see night after night, they were also beguiled by the dancers. The dancers were glamorous and exotic and provided an alluring insight into an unknown theatrical world. They were feted like pop stars. But in turn the dancers themselves were fascinated by Australia and its people. We have first hand accounts of the tours in the form of letters written from Australia to friends and family back home that reveal the thoughts of the dancers.

English dancers Betty Scorer, whose stage name was Elizabeth Souvrova, and Harcourt Algernon Leighton Essex, who adopted the name Algeranoff, have left detailed impressions of the country and its culture and lifestyle. For Souvorova Down Under seemed at first a 'frightful place'. But she soon changed her mind and was happily recording her delight in the colourful flora and fauna and even in being able to surf. Algeranoff's letters are rather more serious but they nevertheless record the pleasures of visits to new places with Australian friends - 'we had a grand picnic lunch in the mountains and the view was superb'. These activities provided welcome relief from the relentless round of rehearsals and performances.

The Ballets Russes inspired triple bill from The Dancers Company is a testament to the influence these legendary companies had in Australia. The programme of Les Sylphides, The Sleeping Beauty Act 3 and Graduation Ball celebrates the kaleidoscope of movement, music, decor and sheer inventiveness that captivated Australians when the Ballets Russes companies toured. It also celebrates the triple bill format that Australians loved so much between 1936 and 1940. The Ballets Russes companies never presented an evening length work in Australia: the triple bill was their calling card.

But perhaps most significantly, the Ballets Russes tours paved the way for the growth and development of Australian dance companies including the Kirsova Ballet, the Borovansky Ballet and The Australian Ballet itself. From the beginning these new companies were able to nurture Australian artists across theatrical disciplines. The Dancers Company triple bill continues the tradition and celebrates the legacy.

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Roman Jasinsky with dancers from the Original Ballet Russe in Les sylphides Photography: Colin Ferguson nla.pic-vn3533632 National Library of Australia









