



The Fairytale of Meryl's Life

by Michelle Potter

Driving from Darwin to Melbourne and back in an FJ Holden with her two sisters and her mother and father is one of Meryl Tankard's earliest memories. "I can't imagine what it was like to do that in 1958," she says. "I think my father was very adventurous." A sense of adventure has permeated Meryl's journey through life ever since, and it has spilled over into her choreographic journey as well.

From Darwin, where Meryl was born, the family moved to Melbourne where she took her first dance classes with well-known teachers Bruce and Bernice Morrow. There too, aged eight or nine, she began to realise that she loved "making things," loved to let her imagination run riot, and loved the wild, unfolding drama of life. An RAAF posting to Penang, Malaysia, for her father opened up a new world of colour, ceremony and excitement for Meryl. And in Penang there were ballet classes from a strict Chinese teacher.

Raymond Terrace, just out of Newcastle, was the next stop. More ballet in Newcastle and then long daily train trips to Sydney for the full-time study of dance to Solo Seal standard. Finally it was back to Melbourne, The Australian Ballet School and, in 1975, a job as a dancer with The Australian Ballet.

Encouraged by the then Artistic Director of The Australian Ballet, Anne Woolliams, Meryl made her first choreographic work in 1977 for an Australian Ballet Choreographic Workshop, *Dance Horizons*. The program was in honour of Dame Peggy van Praagh, the company's founding Artistic Director and a great mentor of young, emerging choreographers. Meryl's work was *Birds behind Bars* and she admits that it was a little unusual. "Oh I had the girls dressed in bird

costumes doing cha-chas and sambas on pointe!" she says. But it was well received and not long afterwards Meryl was given an award by The Australian Ballet Society, which was enough to take her on her first visit to Europe.

In Europe Meryl encountered the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch. It was a defining moment in Meryl's career. She auditioned for Pina's company, Tanztheater Wuppertal. She was accepted and the adventurous, creative streak continued to be nourished and show itself. For the next few years Meryl danced, acted, sang and spoke her way through the Bausch repertoire, and was acclaimed around the world as one of the company's most articulate artists. And, as well as appearing in Pina's highly-charged, expressionistic works, in Germany Meryl collaborated on and appeared in two short, experimental films, one of which, *Sydney on the Wupper* (1983), won a gold medal at the Berlin Film Festival.

Missing the blue skies and open spaces of home, for a few years in the mid 1980s Meryl divided her time between Australia and Europe. She guested with Pina and also worked as a freelance dancer and choreographer. In Europe she performed with Lindsay Kemp. In Australia she made *Echo Point* in 1984, *Travelling Light* in 1986, and worked both on Robyn Archer's television production of *The Pack of Women* and in the television serial *Dancing Daze*. In 1988 she created one of her most remarkable and moving works. It was *Two Feet*, an evening-length solo about being a dancer that drew on the wealth of experiences that had fed into her dancing career until then.

In 1989 Meryl was offered the directorship of a small contemporary dance company in Canberra, which she accepted. Four years of astonishing creativity followed as Meryl, in close collaboration with Régis Lansac, choreographed a series of works for the Meryl Tankard Company.

Meryl and Régis had worked closely together since they first met in the mid 1980s, but in Canberra they began to explore in depth the relationship between movement and visual imagery. Régis' slide projections provided a stunning and inspiring visual counterpart to Meryl's choreography in works such as *Banshee* (1989) and *Nuti* (1990).



Both *Banshee* and *Nuti* were made in conjunction with exhibitions that were showing at the National Gallery of Australia and both were breathtaking for the seamless fluidity that emerged between image and movement as projections played across moving bodies.

Other works of great power were made in Canberra – *VX18504* (1989), *Kikimora* (1990), *Chants de mariage I and II* (1991-1992) and *Songs with Mara* (1992). Meryl was called La Tankard during her four years in Canberra such was the impact of the work she and Régis were creating in the tiny space of wisteria-covered Gorman House Arts Centre.

Meryl left Canberra at the end of 1992 and in 1993 became Artistic Director of Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide. There, with more dancers and a bigger space in which to create, Meryl reworked some of the pieces she had made in Canberra. She also continued that adventurous search for new ways of expressing ideas and emotions through movement. She experimented with the use of ropes on which dancers twisted and flew through space with *Furioso* (1993) and *Possessed* (1995). She made a wickedly funny *Aurora* (1994), collaborated with Indian dancer Padma Menon on *Rasa* (1996), experimented with shadows in *Seulle* (1997) and made an award-winning work, *Inuk* (1997) using a striking combination of voice, image and movement. During this period Meryl also made her first commissioned work for The Australian Ballet, *The Deep End* (1996).

Meryl's works have regularly toured internationally to critical and popular acclaim. Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre was the first Australian company to be invited to perform at the prestigious Brooklyn Academy of Music (*Furioso*) and the company also performed at Sadler's Wells in London, Het Musiktheater in Amsterdam, Maison de la Danse in Lyon and Aoyama Theatre in Tokyo, as well as at festivals including Hamburg Sommer Festival, Steps Dance Festival (Switzerland), Holland Dans Festival, Biennale Nationale de Danse du Val-de-Marne, and Adelaide and Sydney Festivals.

Her many notable collaborators include musicians Mara and Llew Kiek (*Songs with Mara*), Andrew Dalton (counter-tenor) and his Baroque Ensemble and the Balanescu Quartet (*Possessed*). Meryl has worked with Opera Australia twice as a choreographer, winning The Age Performing Arts Award for Best Collaboration in 1995 for her contribution to *Orphee et Eurydice*. Also in 1995, Meryl was the subject of a one hour ABC Television documentary entitled *The Black Swan*, which was awarded Best of Show at the

1995 Dance on Camera Festival in New York.

Since leaving Adelaide in 1998 Meryl has pursued an independent career. Her commissions have come from a diverse range of sources including the Lyon Opera Ballet who commissioned *Bolero* (1998), Andrew Lloyd Webber for whom she choreographed *The Beautiful Game* (2000), the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the New York-based jewellery house Tiffany and Co., Disney, and the Dalai Lama. Last year she created the full-length *Merryland* for NDT 3 with Régis.

In 2003 Meryl's adventurous journey has come full circle back to The Australian Ballet. *Wild Swans* reflects the multi-faceted experiences that have been part of her life from that energetic, imaginative childhood onwards. *Wild Swans* is Meryl's re-creation in dance of a story by Hans Christian Andersen that she knew and loved as a child. She has told it through her own, inventive language. That language reflects both her classical background and her exposure to expressionistic contemporary dance.

Meryl acknowledges the power of the discipline of ballet when she says, "This work is not radical. I was classically trained. There is a discipline there that I love. All the collaborative team has been classically trained in their respective art forms." But she equally acknowledges the power of the dance she encountered elsewhere. "There always has to be a reason behind the steps," she says. "I want to open doors for the dancers. I want them to know that dance concerns both the body and the emotions, and that they are actually connected."

Wild Swans unfolds as an example of Meryl's unique and original voice – powerfully expressive and visually and kinaesthetically remarkable.

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