

# Dancing round a few home truths

A book on the Ballets Russes has some faux pas, **MICHELLE POTTER** writes

At first glance *The Ballets Russes in Australia and Beyond* is a beautiful book. Across its pages is assembled a wealth of visual material: photographs, cartoons, designs, paintings, flyers, programs and advertisements. They are remarkable images and give immediate insight into the attraction that the Ballets Russes companies had for Australians and New Zealanders when those companies toured in the southern hemisphere between 1936 and 1940.

In addition, the publishers have built on the quality of those resources and have created a book that is beautiful to look at and a pleasure to hold.

The book is a major outcome of a substantial grant from the Australian Research Council to investigate the impact of the Ballets Russes tours on the development of the arts in Australia. The project was jointly undertaken over four years by the University of Adelaide, the Australian Ballet and the National Library of Australia.

Fourteen different authors have written 17 essays and an introduction. The inclusion of two essays by non-Australian authors is curious. Both authors, Lynn Garafola and Stephanie Jordan, are distinguished scholars and their essays are outstanding in the quality of the research that informs them. Garafola writes about the choreographer Leonide Massine, and Jordan about her specific area of expertise, the work of Igor Stravinsky. Their essays are international in scope.

The inclusion, however, smacks of cultural cringe. There are very few opportunities for Australian scholars working in the field to be published in their own country. Why deny them an opportunity in favour of those from overseas? Similarly, two authors

have more than one essay. Not necessary in my opinion. At this point I should declare my connections. Although I have had no involvement with the project since mid-2006, I was part of the team that put together the proposal for funding. So it is disappointing to have a book of uneven standards of scholarship.

The best articles are by authors who have undertaken meticulous research coupled with a knowledge and acknowledgment of existing literature, and whose writing is incisive and analytical rather than descriptive. The Australian Research Council's emphasis on excellence in research surely demands such an approach.

Among the better essays, I particularly admired those by Helen Ennis, Andrew Montana and Michael Christoforidis. Ennis looks at some of the Australians who photographed the Ballets Russes companies and sets dance photography in Australia within the context of technological, advertising, art historical and other social developments.

Montana examines the development and influence of the exhibitions of art for theatre and ballet that proliferated during the visits by the Ballets Russes companies. Christoforidis takes the ballet *El Amor Brujo*, performed in Australia as *L'Amour Sorcier*, as a starting point for an examination of the incidence in Australia of Spanish flamenco dance. All have something to say that goes beyond already well-known issues.

There is a strong emphasis throughout the book on music and the visual arts. Music in particular has been somewhat neglected in Ballets Russes scholarship in this country until now, so the emphasis is especially welcome. However, the



Ballets Russes companies were essentially about dance, dancers and choreographers. Without the dance there would not have been the outlets, which proved to be so influential, for the ancillary arts. Unfortunately, in my opinion the dance component of the book is the weakest.

Do we really need another descriptive survey of those dancers who stayed in Australia and went on to form companies here when, for example, there is no serious investigation of the role of Colonel de Basil, the impresario behind the touring

companies? A recent publication has described de Basil as someone who engaged in "arrogant" and "perfidious" behaviour and who was "not trustworthy".

I wonder if there is evidence of this kind of behaviour in the Australian context?

There are also a number of irritating editorial inconsistencies and errors. Why in one particular essay are some titles of dance works written in French and translated into English in brackets while others are not? The choreographer Rex Reid also appears as Rex Reed on one occasion and the

**CLASSIC:** Serge Lifar and Tatiana Riabouchinska pictured for *Le Mariage d'Aurore* (Aurore's Wedding), 1940.

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name of that remarkable first artistic director of the National Theatre Ballet is spelt Joyce Graham rather than Joyce Graeme.

It all goes to make the book a lesser publication than it could or should have been.

More significantly, the publication does not include a bibliography. This is a serious omission.

While this is a book that many will want to have on their bookshelf, it is not all that it might have been.

■ *The Ballets Russes in Australia and Beyond*. Edited by Mark Carroll (Wakefield Press, 358 pp. RRP \$70).