Ballarina’s globetrotting life

Anna Volkova Barnes (March 3, 1917 - August 18, 2013)

Anne Volkova, acclaimed dancer with the legendary Ballet Russes companies, has died in Sydney at the age of 96. Born in Moscow, Volkova was the youngest of three children. Her father was a naval officer in the Russian Imperial Navy, and when it became clear that the Russian Revolution was making it dangerous for the family to remain in Moscow, they fled. They took a ship from Yalta in the Crimea and landed in Yugoslavia before moving on to Paris. It was the beginning of an adventurous life for Volkova, one that would take her around the world and eventually to a marriage in Australia.

The large Russian refugee population in Paris included several ballet teachers, former stars of the Imperial Russian Ballet, who had also fled. So, while her two brothers enlisted at the Sorbonne to continue their education, Anna Volkova began her ballet training with Olgia Preobrazenska.

She was very fierce. Her temper was sometimes stronger than necessary,'' Volkova once said, recalling that Preobrazenska once threw a chair at the studio wall. But Preobrazenska recognized Volkova's talent and offered her free classes.

Volkova's first job was dancing with Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes in a short season at London's Alhambra Theatre in 1933. Then in 1935 she was offered a full contract and spent the next nine years travelling the world with the Ballets Russes. She first came to Australia in 1938 with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet. “The welcome that the Australians gave us was something that we never experienced anywhere else,” she recalled. “We were successful in the States, we were successful in London, but Australia was something special. So many Australian families opened their houses to us.”

At the end of that tour the company returned by ship to England. It was on that voyage that she met the man who was to become her husband, Jim Barnes. He was a member of the Australian rowing team on its way to compete at Henley.

Later in London Barnes asked her to marry him. Volkova refused. She knew that war was imminent and that Barnes intended to join up. If she went to Australia she would be alone. So she decided to continue her career in ballet.

She returned to Australia with the Original Ballet Russe for the 1939-1940 tour and danced main roles in most of the repertoire. Her signature role was the waltz in Les Sylphides and critics praised her for her “flowing lightness”. But with the political situation worsening the company could not return to Europe and in September 1940 headed for the United States and then on to Cuba. In Cuba half the company went on strike and the dancers found themselves practically penniless while de Basil attempted to negotiate contracts for them. They eventually travelled through South America dancing everywhere -- Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Bolivia, finally ending up in Rio de Janeiro. But while they had wonderful seasons they were not paid well.

Then what Volkova once described as “a miracle” happened. She and her close friend, Tatiana Leskova, were offered jobs as guest artists at the Casino Copacabana in Rio where they were paid handsomely and got star treatment. But it was then that she received a telegram from Jim Barnes asking her again to come to Australia and marry him. This time she accepted and headed to Australia on a ship. On arrival she was met by her parents and her younger brother. Jim Barnes had been posted to India for the last months of the war.

Anna Volkova and Jim Barnes were married in April 1946 in Sydney and lived for a while in Cremorne while Barnes ran the family business in Sydney. Volkova gave up her dancing career to become a wife and the mother of two sons. Then the opportunity arose for Barnes to manage one of the family properties, Suffolk Vale, in Boorowa, NSW.

Volkova began a life as the wife of pastoralist on a property employing five jackaroos. Eventually they moved back to Sydney and lived at Belrose. Jim Barnes died in 2003.

Anna Volkova Barnes is remembered fondly by performers and dance enthusiasts around the world. Speaking from Rio de Janeiro, friend and colleague Tatiana Leskova said: “Ania was my oldest friend, my room-mate, companion of good days and difficult ones, too. I was only 17 when I came to Australia with the Original Ballet Russe. Ania was five years older and she guided me around. Although we both danced as soloists, and later as principals, there was never any jealousy between us over our properties, Suffolk Vale, in Boorowa, NSW.”

Anna Volkova Barnes is remembered by her two sons and a grandson.