

The search for identity: Australian dance in the 1950s



Scene from *Terra Australis*,
Borovsky Ballet, 1946
(l-r) Martin Rubinstein, Peggy
Sager and Vassilie Trunoff

Photo: Consolidated Press
Courtesy National Library of Australia

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Introduction

Over the decades, artists, critics and the general dance-goer have often pondered over what distinguishes Australian dance from, say, British dance, or American dance. Often the discussions about Australian-ness concern technique rather than storyline and the Australian dancer's ability to cover space with broad movements is sometimes suggested as a defining characteristic of Australian dance. But to me trying to say that Australian dancers move the way they do because they live in 'the wide brown land' is a bit of a lost cause. But, I **have** found the way in which choreographers have attempted to make works with Australian themes a richly rewarding area of research.

On this opening slide, you can see a scene from *Terra Australis*. I'll be discussing this ballet in a little more detail shortly. But as we look across the 1950s, beginning a little earlier with

Terra Australis, which was made in 1946, it is quite clear to me that the urge to make dances with an Australian theme permeates the work of many of the choreographers of the period, including, in addition to Edouard Borovansky, who choreographed *Terra Australis*, Margaret Barr, Gertrud Bodenwieser, Kira Bousloff, Beth Dean, Laurel Martyn, Rex Reid and Valrene Tweedie (all quite well-known), along with other lesser known choreographers. So, this 1950s urge to stamp one's work as Australian is what I want to talk about today, although, as I mentioned, my initial foray is into the late 1940s. And, with the session which will follow immediately after lunch today, which will include a discussion of the 1950s production of Rex Reid's ballet, *Corroboree* to the score by John Antill, I will have some emphasis in **my** talk on the use of Indigenous themes and motifs, although I will be concentrating on how they have been used in Western-style theatrical dance, and by non-indigenous choreographers.

Terra Australis

We can trace the emergence of Australian themes, Indigenous and non-indigenous, in Western-style theatrical dance at least back to *Terra Australis* that Edouard Borovansky made for his then relatively new Borovansky Ballet. On the screen now you can see two images from that 1946 production, one of which of course repeats my opening image. They show the main characters: The Spirit of Australia, danced by Peggy Sager, the Explorer danced by Martin Rubinstein, and the Aborigine danced by Vassilie Trunoff.

Scenes from *Terra Australia*, Borovansky Ballet, 1946
Courtesy National Library of Australia



Martin Rubinstein, Peggy Sager and Vassilie Trunoff
Photo: Consolidated Press



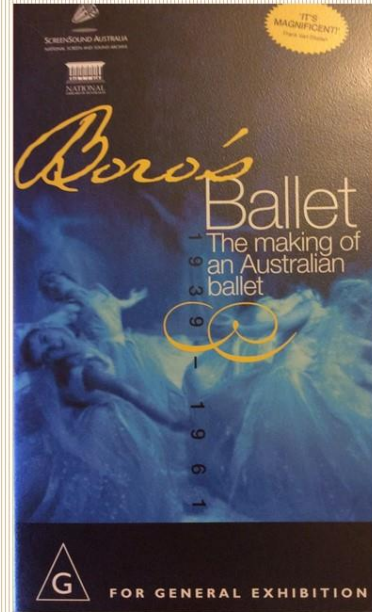
Peggy Sager and Martin Rubinstein
Photo: Jean Stewart

I consider *Terra Australis* to be the first all Australian Ballet, at least by a non-Indigenous choreographer, on any a major scale (despite what Robert Helpmann might think as he claims that honour for himself with *The Display* made about 20 years later). The creatives involved in *Terra Australis* were Borovansky, who received his naturalisation papers in 1945; Melbourne-born Esther Rofe who wrote the commissioned score; Australian author and theatre director, Tom Rothfield, who wrote the libretto; and Australian artist and printmaker, Eve Harris, who designed both backcloth and costumes (although when the work was given its 1947 staging new designs were made by William Constable) whom you see here working on the new designs.



William Constable designing a new set for *Terra Australis*, 1947

Geoffrey Ingram archive of Australian ballet
Courtesy National Library of Australia



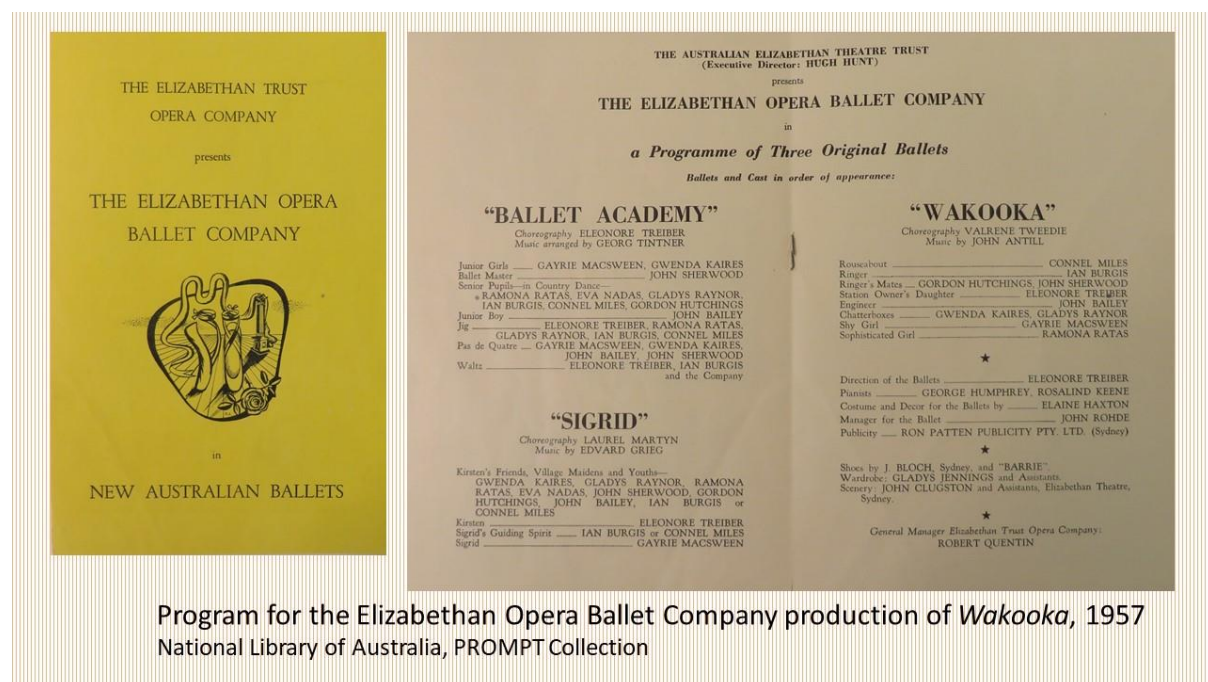
Now, rather than tell you what the ballet was about I am going to leave that to Rothfield, the librettist. He was interviewed in 1946 shortly before the premiere of *Terra Australis* in Melbourne, and part of that audio interview was used on a documentary entitled *Boro's Ballet*, made here in the NFSA in 2001 as a joint venture between the NFSA and the National Library, and as part of a project called Keep Dancing!, which was an Ausdance initiative. And on the screen is the cassette case and its cover for that video. I should just add here that some of the footage of *Terra Australis* you will see is from the 1947 staging, so you will notice the Constable designs, and also that the Spirit of Australia is danced by Kathleen Gorham and not Peggy Sager. Here we go!

[Footage not available for reproduction on this site. Rothfield's words: 'About five years ago, we started working down in the studio. Mr Borovansky, I think he had been going a little under twelve months and I had just come back from England, had ideas very definitely then about creating an Australian ballet to be danced by Australians, and the music to be

written here, and the story here and the décor here. So, we found a community of interest right from the beginning ... Well, we were concerned with writing the true story of Australia, and natural the fate of the Aboriginal [sic] came into it. And, if the national conscience is stirred by the ballet, well so much the better.']

Wakooka

Now, I am going to leave discussion of *Terra Australis* and the other works I will be telling you about until the end, so I'll move right along to a ballet called *Wakooka* made in 1957 for the Elizabethan Opera Ballet Company



It had choreography by Valrene Tweedie, music commissioned from John Antill and designs by Elaine Haxton—again an all-Australian team of creatives. Librettist is not mentioned on the program, but it was a story that Tweedie put together. She had spent holidays visiting relatives in New South Wales sheep country where the idea of a ballet about shearing had come to her. But she had also been strongly influenced by American choreographer Agnes

de Mille and had, in fact, danced the role of the Rancher's Daughter at the world premiere season of de Mille's *Rodeo* by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942, when de Mille danced the lead role of the Cowgirl. Tweedie was inspired by de Mille's courage and determination to make an American ballet, which indeed *Rodeo* was, and de Mille was a significant influence on Tweedie when she returned to Australia in the 1950s.

The libretto was fairly simple and you can see it now on the screen, as it appeared in the 1957 program.

Wakooka synopsis

"WAKOOKA":

Is danced against a sheep station background somewhere in present-day Australia. The scene opens in the early morning with the entrance of a rouseabout, three shearers and the station owner's daughter. Flirting with the boys, the girl can't decide whom she prefers, and this is further complicated by the entrance of a young engineer from a nearby project, who wishes to obtain information from the girl's father. Interested in the young man, the girl invites him to a barbecue that evening.

The second scene opens with the preparations for the barbecue and the arrival of the girls. After greeting each other, they all dance, although the station owner's daughter is unhappy, as the engineer has not arrived. Eventually he comes, and the party is a tremendous success.

I had a little trouble finding images from *Wakooka* that showed anything that might be construed as a shearing scene and the only one I could find was from *Gentle Genius*, a biography of John Antill, written by Beth Dean and Victor Carrell. So it's not high quality resolution.



Rehearsing the shearing scene from *Wakooka*

(l-r) Gordon Wall(?), [Hutchings?], Ian Burgess, Eleanor Treiber and John Sherwood

Source: *Gentle Genius. A life of John Antill* by Beth Dean and Victor Carell (Sydney: Akron Press, 1987)

How accurate the shearer's movements are I can't tell, but Tweedie did spend some time watching shearers so that she could approximate their movements in some dancerly way. A notebook in her personal papers held in the National Library records various moves that she was planning to use and a newspaper report mentions that she had a shearer come to her home and shear an imaginary sheep in her backyard in Double Bay in Sydney while she studied his actions. Her papers also contain a synopsis of the various scenes with time allocations, which I suspect she used for her collaborative meetings with John Antill as he created his score, which was for two pianos. In addition, in her papers there is a list of Aboriginal words she thought she might use as the title. So her papers provide an insight into the collaborative process.

Amongst Tweedie's papers, I also found some photos of the party scene, and they give you an idea of the relaxed mood of the piece.



Wakooka in rehearsal

Eleanor Treiber with
Gordon Hutchings
(left) and Ian Burgis

Photographer unknown

Design was by Elaine Haxton and some of her designs were reproduced by the magazine
Woman's Day shortly before *Wakooka's* premiere in Brisbane in August 1957.



Valrene Tweedie in *Ranch House*
National Theatre Ballet workshop, 1955
Photographer unknown



Elaine Haxton: Designs for *Wakooka*

Source: *Woman's Day*, 5 August 1957



Voice of Valrene Tweedie
Oral History interview TRC 5350,
2004
National Library of Australia

And as an aside, a few years ago, I discovered some designs by Elaine Haxton in the National
Gallery of Australia labelled *The Squatter's Daughter* and in an oral history I recorded with

Tweedie in 2004 I asked her about those designs because I was pretty sure they were for *Wakooka*. Her answer was quite interesting and it also included an anecdote about how the ballet came to be called *Wakooka*. On the slide above is a photo of Tweedie, as she appeared in a work called *Ranch House* which she choreographed and danced in for a National Theatre Ballet workshop in 1955, two years before *Wakooka*, and coming up is an extract from my oral history with her in which she talks about *Ranch House*, about the designs for *Wakooka*, and about the origin of the name of the ballet. Oh, and incidentally right at the beginning of the audio segment she accidentally refers to *Ranch House* as *The Squatter's Daughter*, so don't be confused. And also, the American composer she mentions was Aaron Copeland. **[Audio is available on the main web page for this text]**

G'Day Digger

Wakooka was televised by the ABC in 1961 and was also restaged for a season by Ballet Australia in the same year. But, as I said, I will leave comments until a little later and move on to a work that was the first ballet to be televised by the ABC, which happened in early 1958. The choreography was by Beth Dean, the libretto by Dean's husband Victor Carell, and the ballet was called *G'Day Digger*. I probably don't need to tell you what the ballet was about, its title gives much away, but it was described in an ABC promotion as 'a light-hearted fantasy about an Australian digger and his mate who set out to enjoy life in Sydney when on leave from Tobruk.' And just in case the word 'digger' is unfamiliar to anyone, it is military slang for Australian and New Zealand soldiers, and when the description says Sydney it means a bar in Kings Cross.

Two scenes from Beth Dean's *G'Day Digger*



Left (clockwise from top left): Beth Dean as Sheila, Valrene Tweedie as May the barmaid, Colin Fitzgerald as the Digger, and Alex Crethar as his Mate





Above: Valrene Tweedie and Alex Crethar

The ballet was commissioned by the Arts Council and it toured country areas after its television debut. Music was again by John Antill and much was made of the fact that he allegedly introduced concrete music into the score for one particular interlude, choosing a variety of sounds from the ABC library including factory, restaurant and crowd background noises, ship's engines, a car revving up and other such noises. I say allegedly because a number of critics remarked that it wasn't true concrete music, although I can't go into that here. On the slide above you can see the main cast of characters. I can't say much more about *G'Day Digger* other than its subject matter was, to say the least, something of a change from most of the dance being made in the 1950s.

Aboriginal Spear Dance

Moving along now to my fourth example: Gertrud Bodenwieser's *Aboriginal Spear Dance*. This work has always intrigued me because I have never really been able to establish its place in Bodenwieser's output. In 1956 she created a suite of three dances under the title

Central Australian Suite. The three parts were *Solitude*, *The Wild Chase* and *A Child is Born*. It was danced by Coralie Hinkley and Keith Bain and was set to music by Camille Gheysens, a Belgian-born gentleman who moved to Australia in the 1920s.

Portraits of Camille Gheysens and listings of his Kulamarra/Central Australian works

Source: Camille C. Gheysens, *Repertoire of 555 compositions, 1918-1986*
National Library of Australia

333. Une promenade sous les bois. " "

334. Une apres midi. " "

(335 Ballet Kulamara - light orchestra & instruments.

(341. " " also on discs. (4 discs.) 45 speed.

(342 to Septete de concert in 5 parts. Small orchestra

REPERTOIRE - CHAMBER MUSIC.

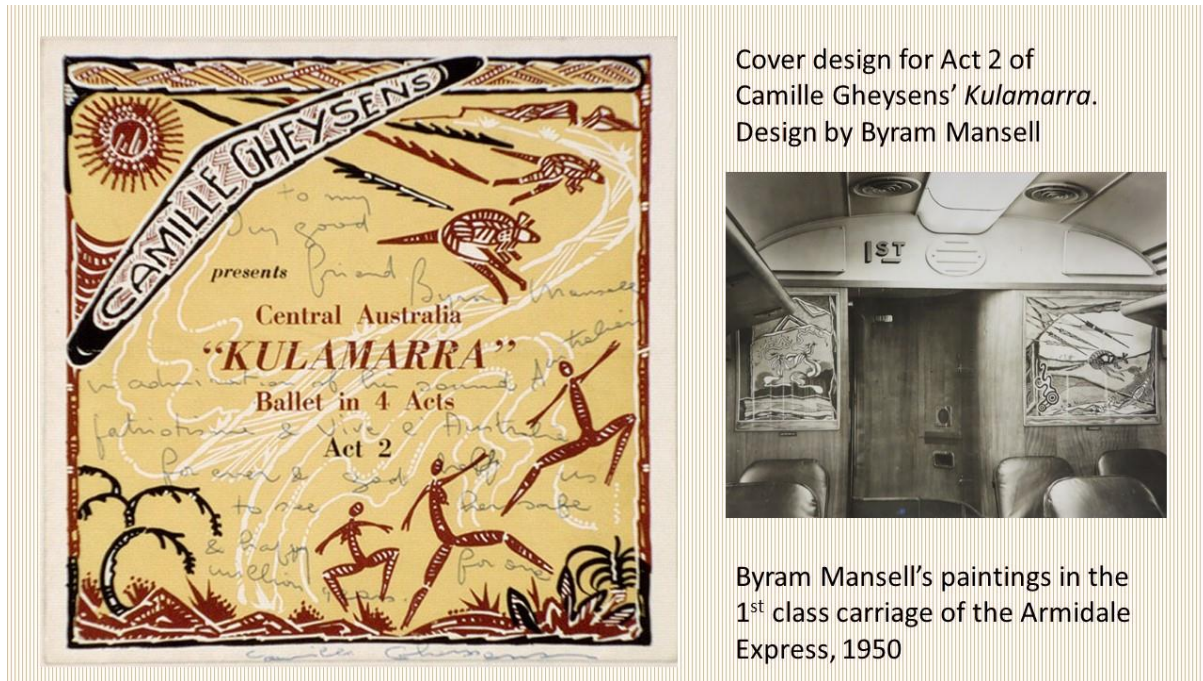
GROUP C.

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Opus 88. | Flashing Spanish Eyes - Bolero-sequidillo. | Octet |
| 89. | A Military Romance. | " |
| 100. | Windmill. | Strings, flute & Piano |
| 124. | La Brabanconne (Belgian anthem) | Sextet |
| 125. | Motto perpetuo. | Quintete |
| 151. | Hommage a la Belgique. | " |
| 152. | Megalong Valley (Australia) | " |
| 153. | A Spanish scene. | " |
| 154. | Ballet - Pierrot & Pierette (Arlequin) | " |
| 186. | Kulamara - Australian scenic in 4 discs (45 speed) | Small orchestra |
| | 4 discs duration - 42 minutes. | |

You see him on the screen now along with a couple of extracts from his catalogue of works in which his ballet music is mentioned. He was a wool-broker, an avid art collector and very wealthy and, while his music has never received the kind of response that John Antill's has, for example, his wealth enabled him to become a patron to Bodenwieser. Bodenwieser dancer Anita Ardell in an oral history interview recorded in 2004 said of Gheysens: 'I don't think that Madame really loved his music. Werner Baer certainly didn't, and he was the musical director of the ABC at the time. But Madame was a very practical person. If this man were going to provide costumes and venues for her choreography, then so be it.'

But Gheysens also wrote the music for *Aboriginal Spear Dance*, which you will see shortly. It isn't mentioned in his catalogue of works and I have started to wonder whether it is one

part of the four-part ballet music he wrote. It is frustrating that Gheysens says there are four parts to his ballet but doesn't identify those parts at all. I did, however, find a cover for a recording Gheysens had made of his music, which is on the screen now.



The music as recorded is called, as you can see, *Central Australia, Kulamarra, Ballet in four acts*. So, I have never been able to establish the relationship, if any, between the three parts of *Central Australian Suite* and *Aboriginal Spear Dance*. Nor have I yet been able to pinpoint the meaning of Kulamarra, although the name appears on the transcript of a parliamentary hearing into Aboriginal Land Rights in 1995 at which evidence was given by the Kula-Marra Community Council, so I am assuming it was an Aboriginal kinship group.

The record cover itself is quite interesting. It was designed by Byram Mansell, who, I discovered, was a Sydney-born artist, trained in Paris and having an early career as a set designer for Cecil B. de Mille in Hollywood. Returning to Australia he took up painting Aboriginal motifs as a result of seeing photographs and drawings from an Australian-

American anthropological expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948. He got quite carried away with this work and dug his own pigments, used cactus juice as a binding agent and painted with feathers rather than brushes. In the 1950s he painted art works for galleries, made ceramics including murals for the Commonwealth Bank in Martin Place, Sydney, painted textiles, including on a sari for the wife of India's Information Officer to Australia, and made a series of panels commissioned by NSW Railways for the Armidale Express when it was inaugurated in the early 1950s, which you can see on the slide above. All his work during the 1950s seems to have had Aboriginal motifs, including a ceramic dinner set he made.

Anyway, that is all a bit esoteric and, to return to the dance itself, here is Keith Bain in *Aboriginal Spear Dance*, choreography by Gertrud Bodenwieser, music Camille Gheysens.

[Footage not available on this site]

Analysis

So what can we gather from this very small selection of dance from the 1950s that I have chosen to discuss? I'll go first to *G'Day Digger*. It received very little praise and I'll quote a section from a very scathing review: 'G'Day Digger, by John Antill, is to be deplored, first of all, on the count of its title. As a sample of Australian culture, this sort of rugged patois promotes us exactly nowhere; ... Further as a piece of Terpsichorean entertainment it left me quite gelid [icy cold].'



Vassilie Trunoff in *Terra Australis*



Colin Fitzgerald, Valrene Tweedie and Alex Crethar in *G'Day Digger*



Eleanor Treiber and John Bailey in *Wakooka*

Nevertheless, it is still an example of a choreographer making an effort to create an Australian ballet and has a place in any discussion of a search for an identity, if an identity of a fairly narrow kind. And, in many respects, we are still having discussions about diggers and the war. Is Anzac Day a true representation of an Australian way of life. Is it, or is it not, the definitive Australian moment?

Wakooka, on the other hand, might be seen as an example of a wider theme that emerged in the 1950s – economic growth and development of the land at a time when a homogeneous Anglo-Celtic culture was regarded by some as under threat from waves of European migration. A dinkum Aussie was the ideal and he probably lived on the land. And some are still involved in expressing a desire for similar ideals, if the exact details are slightly different. At the time, however, *Wakooka* was well received, much more so than *G'Day Digger*. And it gave, through its title, a nod to the indigenous inhabitants of Australia, however cursory that might seem to us.

Turning now to the two works with indigenous content. I find *Terra Australis* an especially interesting work. It was a symbolic description of the arrival of the white man in Australia and the catastrophic situation that emerged for First Nation people. Its method of costuming, its Western-focused choreography, and other such aspects of the work, are somewhat painful to watch these days, but it was, I believe, an honest effort to bring attention to an aspect of the Australian story that even today is often not fully acknowledged.

Then, I have deliberately used the *Aboriginal Spear Dance* footage in this talk because I want to make it quite clear that Indigenous themes and motifs were being used by many choreographers, including those, like Bodenwieser, who are regarded with admiration for bringing a new, non-balletic style of dance to the public.

To me the use of Indigenous motifs and themes in dancemaking of the 1950s seems like part of what has recently been discussed as ‘the consumption of Aboriginalia’. It reached something of a peak in the 1950s, and you have seen one remarkable example in the art and craft work of Byram Mansell, and here he is again.



And I remember very clearly a visit in the 1950s to La Perouse in Sydney when I was a young child and seeing boomerangs being thrown and all kinds of items made from mulga wood on sale.

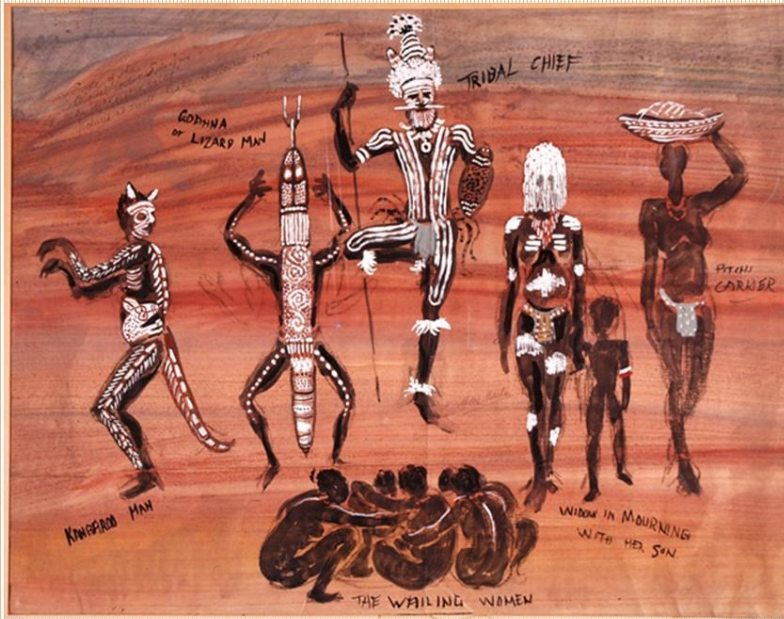
And at this point I'd like to recommend to you an interesting article, published online by the ABC a few days ago, which examined this concept of Aboriginalia and gave a brief history of it in relation to visual arts and craft [<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-05/aboriginalia-and-the-politics-of-aboriginal-kitsch/8323130>]. And perhaps what was most interesting about it was that the author, Dr Liz Conor from LaTrobe, maintained that the kind of Aboriginalia that was common in the 1950s did indeed suggest 'that authentic Aboriginal identity was purely tribal and something to be trivialised as curios and knick-knacks'. **But** she also went on to place what was happening at that time in a particular social and cultural context, and didn't make use of the idea of presentism, that is using present-day perspectives to interpret. She also went on to give examples of how Indigenous artists today

are using the kinds of items that were being made for general and tourist consumption in the 1950s. She gives several interesting examples of how these items are being repurposed to comment on what was in the 1950s an uncritical consumption of Aboriginalia.

While dance is in a different category and can't really repurpose objects, it can reinterpret events in a political, intelligent and intellectually satisfying way. And as I say this I am reminded a little of some works being made by Bangarra, including most recently that amazing work by Jasmine Sheppard, *Macq*, which looked at the 1816 Appin massacre ordered by Governor Macquarie. And there have been other works from Bangarra that have re-contextualised Western accounts of history. So, I'd like to suggest that the search for identity is and will be a continuing one.

Conclusion

But to conclude, there are many other works I could have chosen as examples. I am interested, for example in works that take Australian literary materials as a starting point, such as Laurel Martyn's *Sentimental Bloke*, made in 1952. And there are other works using indigenous material that are scarcely known, let alone examined. I discovered only just recently that a ballet called *Korobra* was presented in Melbourne as part of a Tivoli program associated with the 1956 Olympic Games.



Max Martin, Costume designs for *Korobra*, c. 1949
Courtesy Jeremy Hill

It had designs by a little-known artist called Max Martin, who also, apparently, did the choreography. Dance research remains a constantly evolving and challenging area of study.

Thank you.



Cast of *Korobra*, 1956
Photographer unknown
Courtesy Jeremy Hill

With thanks to

National Film and Sound Archive

National Library of Australia

Jeremy Hill