



## Farewell to a grand dame

DATE AND PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In her domain at the Australian Ballet School.

**D**AME Margaret Scott, who has died in Melbourne at the age of 96, was the founding director of The Australian Ballet School.

Maggie, as she preferred to be known, steered the development of the School from 1964, with the arrival of the first intake of students, until 1990. Over a 27 year period she planned curriculum, auditioned students, selected teachers, agonised over student welfare, encouraged emerging choreographers and thrived on what she called “creative change”.

Maggie was also a key figure in the establishment of the Australian Ballet Foundation, which came into being as a result of a series of informal meetings in her Toorak home in the late 1950s. Guided by the distinguished public servant Dr H. C. “Nugget” Coombs, Maggie was the motivating force behind a group of dance professionals concerned that there was no ongoing employment for Australian dancers in their home country. Their efforts to ensure that Australian talent remained in Australia, and that

dancers could expect year-long contracts, resulted in the creation of the Foundation, and ultimately in the formation of The Australian Ballet in 1962, which preceded the formation of The Australian Ballet School.

Born in 1922 as Catherine Margaret Mary Scott in Johannesburg, South Africa, Maggie was the youngest in the family. She enjoyed a free and easy childhood with her two older siblings, twins Joan and Barbara, and she took dance lessons from Ivy Conmee, a pioneer teacher of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) syllabus in South Africa. But Maggie went to England in 1939 at the suggestion of RAD examiner and adjudicator Kathleen Danetree, who recognised Maggie’s talent when on a visit to South Africa.

In London Maggie was accepted into the Sadler’s Wells Ballet School but joined the Sadler’s Wells Ballet shortly afterwards. She danced the classics, as well as new choreography by Frederick Ashton and Ninette de Valois, and shared the stage with many celebrated dancers, including Margot Fonteyn

and Robert Helpmann. But, dissatisfied with her prospects in the Sadler’s Wells company, she resigned and successfully auditioned for Ballet Rambert. There she was in the company of choreographers, composers and designers who were constantly creating new work. She relished dancing the works of Antony Tudor, Walter Gore, Frank Staff and Andrée Howard, while continuing to dance the classics and the works of Ashton.

Life in England coincided with the war years and Maggie experienced not only air raids and bombings but relentless touring as Ballet Rambert became involved in the war effort, criss-crossing England to entertain troops in camps and workers in armament factories.

Ballet Rambert made a momentous tour to Australia and New Zealand between 1947 and 1949 and Maggie, who by then had reached the level of principal dancer, was part of the company for that tour. But a serious back injury cut short her Australian appearances and resulted in a long spell in hospital in Sydney. When the Rambert company left Australia in





Dame Margaret Scott with Ross Stretton in 1971 at The Australian Ballet School, Mt Alexander Road studios, Flemington.

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1949, Maggie stayed. She made a comeback with the National Theatre Ballet when it formed in Melbourne in 1949 but her work with the National was short-lived. Her back injury resulted in another lengthy stay in hospital, this time in Melbourne.

In 1952 Maggie returned to England and her career entered a vibrant period. She joined a small group of dancers, choreographers and artists led by John Cranko, who was creating small, chamber ballets for this group. Later she became ballet mistress for Ballet Rambert and led the company on regional tours. But in 1953 she returned to Australia with medical researcher Derek (Dick) Denton, whom she had met in Melbourne while dancing with Ballet Rambert, and whom she married in Cambridge in 1953. Once back in Australia Maggie began teaching and it was from this new beginning in Australia that her work to establish ballet in Australia on a national level emerged.

It was one of the great disappointments of Maggie's life that her retirement as director of The Australian Ballet School was forced upon her. She left the School in 1990 feeling bitterly disappointed at the way her retirement had been handled. Her dismissal, however, was followed by a second career as a performer. Maggie returned to the stage in three roles during the 1990s, each time in a work choreographed and

directed by one of her former students from The Australian Ballet School. In 1990, at a special gala staged in her honour by Robert Ray, she played Aunt Sophy in Ray's *Nutcracker*, a ballet Maggie had commissioned for The Australian Ballet School in 1985; she starred as Clara the Elder in Graeme Murphy's *Nutcracker: the story of Clara*, first staged in 1992 for The Australian Ballet; and in 1995 she took on the speaking role of Mary Ward in *In the Body of the Son* created by Nicholas Rowe for the Darwin Festival.

A forthright woman, Maggie was never afraid to speak honestly. She had an eye for talent but would not countenance what she called the “aggression of the untalented”. She was fond of saying, “Talent is its own force. You can't make it; you can't fake it; and you can't break it”. Nor could she tolerate the idea of a cultural cringe. “What we have in Australia is unique,” she maintained.

Maggie was admired by her students for her relentless pursuit of excellence, for her unwavering commitment to creativity, and for her continuous support of their endeavours long after their student days were over.

Honours were heaped upon Maggie throughout her life. She was made Dame Commander in the Civil Division of the British Empire in 1981 for services to ballet,

an award that had been preceded by an Order of the British Empire, an OBE, in 1976. Those honours were followed by a Companion of the Order of Australia, an AC, in 2005. Her commitment to fostering the talents of dancers and choreographers was also recognised by the University of Melbourne with an honorary Doctor of Law conferred in 1989, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology with an honorary Doctor of Education shortly afterwards.

Maggie is survived by her husband, Emeritus Professor Derek Denton, and by her sons, Matthew and Angus, and their families.

— MICHELLE POTTE

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**Dame Margaret Scott, AC, DBE, OBE.**

**BORN:** Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 April, 1922.

**DIED:** Melbourne, Australia, 24 February, 2019.

“... si monumentum requiris, circumspice.”