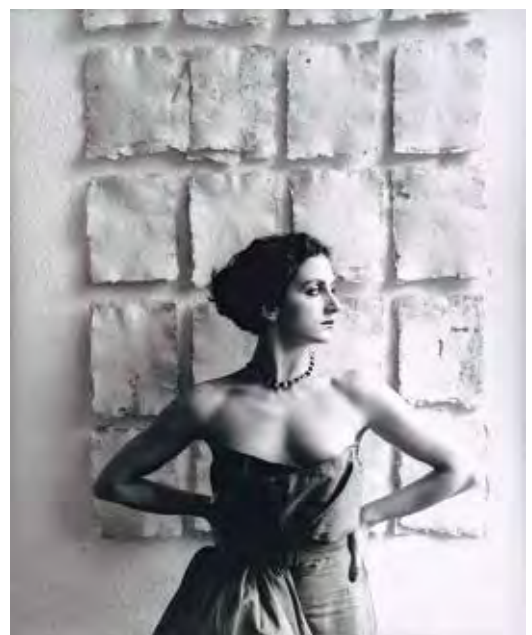
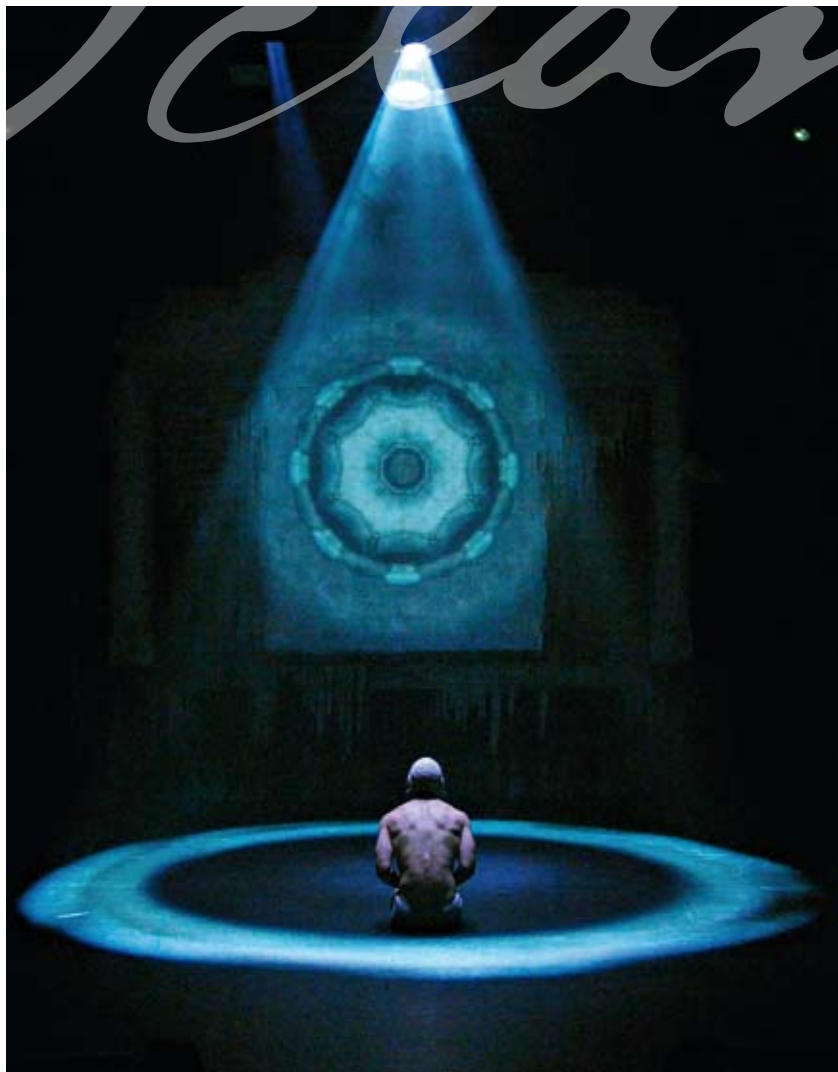




## *Oceanic Accomplishments in Choreography*

MICHELLE POTTER REVIEWS MERYL  
TANKARD'S PRIZE-WINNING AND WORLD-  
FAMOUS CHOREOGRAPHIC ACHIEVEMENTS  
BOTH IN AUSTRALIA AND OVERSEAS





AT THE 2010 AUSTRALIAN DANCE Awards, the coveted prize for outstanding achievement in choreography went to Meryl Tankard and Paul White for a collaborative solo work entitled *The Oracle*. Choreographically *The Oracle*, danced to Igor Stravinsky's seminal *Rite of Spring*, showed Tankard at her finest. Her vocabulary for White, the solo dancer, alternated between small and intricate movements of the hands and fingers, and even of the tongue, and movements that demanded that White fling himself through the air, while always maintaining absolute control of the whole body as it hurtled through space. The work was at the same time delicately introverted and exuberantly extroverted.

In addition to Tankard and White, the creative team included Régis Lansac as set and video designer, and Damien Cooper and Matt Cox as lighting designers. *The Oracle* demonstrated how affecting dance can be

when a team has a strong shared vision and works single-mindedly to bring that vision into being. The work and its virtuosic performance won not only the award for outstanding choreography, but also an award for White in the category of best performance by a male dancer.

Since 1999, Tankard has worked entirely as an independent artist. Over that time, she has created dances for a range of companies in Australia and abroad, as her papers held in the National Library of Australia's Manuscripts Collections attest. In addition, her commissions since 1999 have come from high-end commercial clients, such as the New York-based jewellery firm, Tiffany & Co.; from filmmakers, including the provocative Australian director Ana Kokkinos; from youth theatre, including the Australian Theatre for Young People; and from a range of respected international production companies, including Disney Theatrical Productions and Andrew

OPPOSITE ABOVE, ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT  
Régis Lansac (b.1947)  
*Paul White in The Oracle*  
digital colour photographs  
Courtesy Régis Lansac

OPPOSITE BELOW  
Régis Lansac (b.1947)  
*Portrait of Meryl Tankard, Wuppertal, 1984*  
gelatin silver photograph  
58.5 x 47.7 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an23737549



Régis Lansac (b.1947)  
*Frances Rings* (foreground)  
 with Tanya Sternberg in *Pearl*  
 2003  
 digital colour photograph  
 Pictures Collection  
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Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Company.

Much of her independent work illustrates her skill at using unusual, often difficult spaces as her stage, as well as her ability not only to create an expressive piece of dance but also to achieve the best possible outcome for commercial sponsors. *Living Oceans*, for example, was commissioned by the Tiffany & Co. Foundation in 2001 for the opening of an exhibition on the history of the pearl, which included displays of Tiffany pearl jewellery. *Living Oceans* was a promotional venture, with Tankard's brief being to create a work that would show Tiffany items in a new and innovative light and bring them to life.

*Living Oceans* was performed by 12 dancers in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Milstein Hall is a cavernous, rectangular space encircled by a mezzanine balcony with several staircases leading down to the main floor area. The whole area is

presided over by a huge replica of a blue whale suspended from the domed ceiling. For the 500 to 600 guests at the opening, who initially gathered on the mezzanine level, Tankard transformed the space below into a deep ocean pool, populating it with an assortment of dancing sea creatures, including anemones, fish and coral forms. As the work proper came to an end, the floor was transformed into a dining area and Tankard's dancers took their places on elevated stands scattered among the tables. Guests then found themselves on the ocean floor and physically part of the performance as they looked up at the sea creatures. *Living Oceans* was repeated when the exhibition moved to Chicago.

Fernanda Kellogg, president of the Tiffany & Co. Foundation, has commented on the easy manner in which Tankard solved the challenges of the commission, not the least of which was the space. But Kellogg has also remarked that the greatest success of the work

was the way in which Tankard was able to promote the company as a place of creativity that aspires to produce beautiful items.

*Living Oceans* was followed by two more works with similar, watery themes: *Ocean Dance*, performed in Sydney at the Dalai Lama Tribute Concert in 2002, and *Pearl*, a work celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Sydney Opera House in 2003. Water and watery elements have been ongoing themes throughout Tankard's career, reaching as far back as *Echo Point*, one of her earliest choreographic works, first performed in Sydney in 1984 and restaged in Canberra in 1989.

But if Tankard's independent commissions show her capacity to work in diverse situations and for a range of clients, they also illustrate the diversity of scale in which she operates. She is able to slip easily between the large scale and the intimate when it comes to creating her work—*The Oracle*, with just one dancer on stage, sits at one end of the spectrum and, at the other, is *Deep Sea Dreaming*, the initial segment of the opening ceremony for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. *Deep Sea Dreaming* was a major and popular commission and it put Tankard's choreography onto the world stage as a result of a telecast watched by millions. It was also the catalyst for her Tiffany & Co. commission from Kellogg, who has a strong, personal interest in the Olympic movement and was in Sydney for the 2000 Olympics. Kellogg was impressed by *Deep Sea Dreaming* and, when asked to take on the promotional opening for the pearl exhibition, she says that she 'acted on impulse' and picked up the phone to call Tankard.

The *Deep Sea Dreaming* segment highlighted Australia's love affair with the ocean. It opened with 'Hero Girl', played by 13-year-old Nikki Webster, spreading her beach towel on the ground, applying sunscreen and dreaming. As she dreamt she was swept upwards—attached to a harness and aerial equipment—and began to somersault and swim in midair as she imagined sharing the

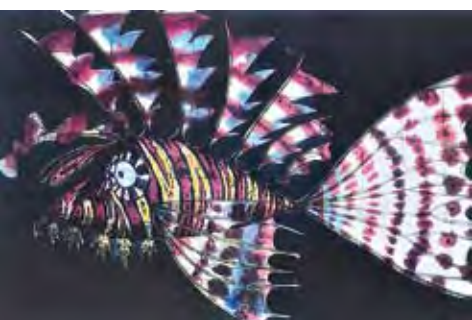


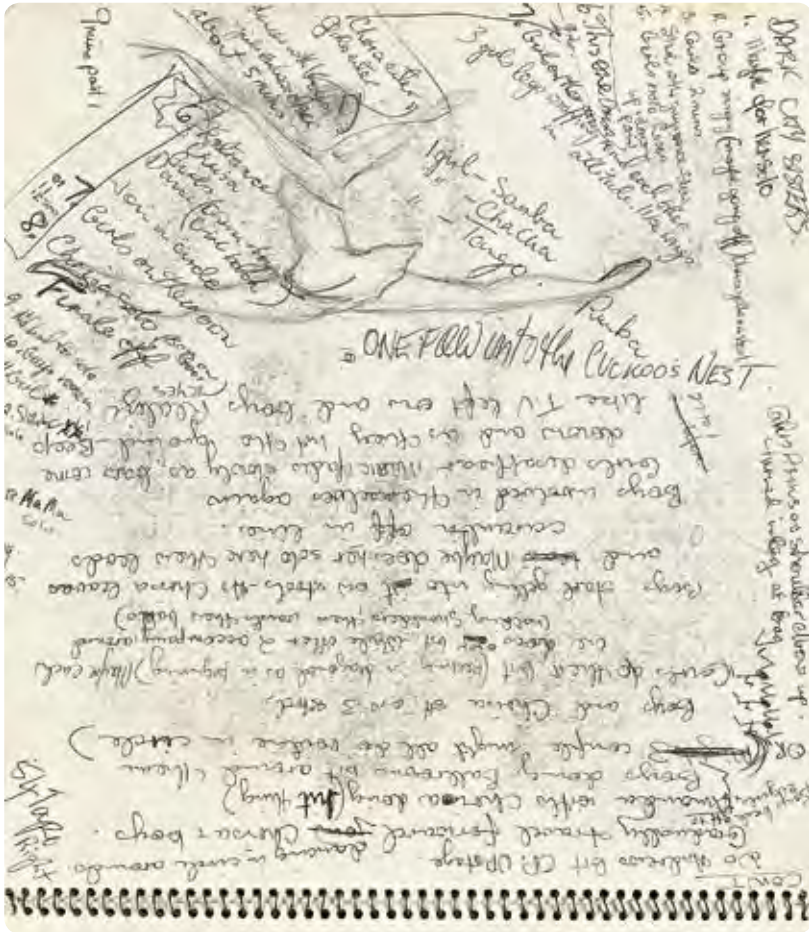
LEFT  
Régis Lansac (b.1947)  
Meryl Tankard as Olga in  
'Two Feet', Canberra Theatre,  
July 1989  
gelatine silver photograph  
25.5 x 13.8 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an13019319

BELOW  
Dan Potra  
Colour concepts for sea  
creatures in *Deep Sea  
Dreaming* for the Sydney 2000  
Olympic Games Opening  
Ceremony  
Papers of Meryl Tankard  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9940  
Courtesy Dan Potra

ocean with giant jellyfish, stingrays, anemones and all kinds of exotic fish, from barracuda to angel fish. Tankard's aim was to create a space in which audience and performers were one. 'Hopefully [the audience] will feel they are in this liquid world—a part of the segment, not just watching it. I want to make the whole stadium move as if it were water,' she said in the program notes.

The sea creatures in *Deep Sea Dreaming* were designed by Dan Potra and required creative solutions to the problems of designing costumes for unusual characters. Those for the 'anemone people', for example, consisted of trousers that could be stretched to cover a back pack. This pack contained a collection





ABOVE AND BELOW  
Meryl Tankard (b.1955)  
Sketches from Meryl Tankard's  
sketchbooks  
Papers of Meryl Tankard  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 9940

of long balloons each topped by a round helium-filled balloon. The clumps of balloons represented the tentacles of the anemone. Potra's sea creatures featured on the front pages of newspapers around the world, with perhaps the most widely circulated images

being those of a golden-haired Webster in her pink floral dress over pink lycra shorts floating above huge pink jellyfishes.

To handle the aerial activities of the performers and the suspension of an assortment of props, the technical specifications for *Deep Sea Dreaming* were complex. According to Ric Birch, director of ceremonies for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, they consisted of a computerised flying rig of 11 cables strung above the Olympic stadium,



each around 120 metres long and 10 metres apart. In addition to working alongside such technical complexities, Tankard worked with a huge cast of around 800, many of whom were volunteers. The cast included young children, who were required to move together like a school of fish, a children's choir, which was part of Elena Kats-Chernin's *Deep Sea Dreaming* score, and the young and exuberant members of the Australian circus training institution, Flying Fruit Fly Circus.

The scope of Tankard's contribution to the Olympic opening ceremony was enormous. She made use of aerial choreography on a dramatic scale, her 'Hero Girl' was a feature of the entire ceremony and, if the audience was meant to feel part of the space, they could not fail to recognise the scale of the endeavour, which 'Hero Girl' helped expose—'this tiny child in the middle of the huge arena' wrote one journalist. In terms of scale, it would be hard to find two such opposites as *The Oracle* and *Deep Sea Dreaming*.

Having one's own choreographer-led company, as Tankard did between 1989 and 1999 when she directed the Meryl Tankard Company in Canberra and the Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide, is something of a luxury in the twenty-first century. More and more choreographers work independently and take commissions as they are offered. This may not be an ideal situation, especially for a choreographer like Tankard, who does not work with a codified vocabulary but who creates new vocabulary for each work and who benefits particularly from having an ongoing group of dancers familiar with her specific working processes. But even a cursory look at Tankard's independent works demonstrates the remarkable and varied creativity that can emerge from a choreographer who willingly takes on diverse challenges. Outstanding choreography is a well-deserved description not just of *The Oracle* but of Tankard's entire output.

MICHELLE POTTER is an independent dance writer, historian and curator with a doctorate in Art History and Dance History from the Australian National University