



Lifeblood

Don Asker and the Human Veins Dance Theatre

Michelle Potter tells the history of Canberra's first professional dance company

The Company [Human Veins Dance Theatre] found an unexpected home in the national capital, a city not generally known for its cultural activities.

This provocative statement appeared in program notes for the 1982 Canberra season of two monumental dance productions, *Les Noces* and *Oresteia*. The works were staged jointly by Human Veins Dance Theatre and the Canberra School of Music. Don Asker led Human Veins as choreographer and artistic director of the very ambitious double bill, with Christopher Lyndon Gee acting as musical director. Not surprisingly, the remark that Canberra was not well known for its cultural activities sparked off some

public debate in the pages of the *Canberra Times*, and the offending sentence was removed from the program for the Melbourne season that followed a few months later. That Human Veins had found a home in Canberra—in wisteria-covered Gorman House, the city's community arts centre—was, however, not in dispute.

Human Veins was Canberra's first professional dance company and, as the company records indicate, it blossomed in Canberra as an outcome of an Australian National University Creative Arts Fellowship offered early in 1980 to Asker, a Melbourne-born choreographer and dancer. The Human Veins records are housed in the National Library's Manuscript Collection as MS7629 and they document that, after dancing with the Australian Ballet and then with the London Festival Ballet, Asker spent the late 1970s in the Netherlands as house choreographer for the prestigious Netherlands Dance Theatre. Then, while working as an

Human Veins Dance Theatre
The Company, Gorman House,
Canberra, 1988

photographer: Ross Gould
Manuscript Collection MS7629/7153/22

independent choreographer with fringe groups in Europe, he founded a small dance theatre ensemble that gave its first performance at the Festival of New Music in Middleburg, the Netherlands, in 1979. The company regrouped in Melbourne in 1980, toured briefly and then moved on to Canberra when Asker was awarded his Australian National University (ANU) fellowship. In Canberra in 1980, Asker produced the first full-length work for Human Veins, an examination of male adolescence entitled *The Year of the Monkey*. At the conclusion of Asker's two-month residency at the ANU, Canberra's arts community successfully lobbied to have the company funded to stay on as the city's resident dance company, with Asker at the helm.

The company's name derived from a Dutch expression, *op menselijk stemming*, which implies 'lifeblood' or 'human temperament'. Its transformation into the name Human Veins was meant to reflect the company's fundamental aim, which was to capture the spirit of life and to develop new works relevant to modern society. Throughout the nine years of its existence, Human Veins did just that. Frequently the company derived its inspiration from social and political themes. *Under the Skin*, for example, made for Human Veins in 1980, reflected upon social conventions and the influence of alternative life styles, and *Double Shuffle*, presented by the company in 1988 in association with the Sydney-based One Extra Company, examined the attitudes of people in power and was inspired by images on large advertising billboards. Asker was not averse, however, to more romantic ideals and to using literature as a source of inspiration. In 1983, he staged *In the Distance Someone Singing*, which was based on the poetry of the French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud and which took as a theme man's attempt to reconcile dreams and reality. *Shedding of Leaves*, originally made for the Kibbutz Dance Company of Israel in 1979 and revived for Human Veins, was inspired by the characters of Patrick White's novel, *Voss*. The company's policy of experimentation within a theatrical genre also remained constant and the works choreographed for Human Veins by Asker and others frequently mixed image, speech and song with dance. Asker also commissioned many original scores from Australian composers and worked with a variety of visual artists, including leather artist Garry Greenwood who designed masks, headpieces and musical instruments for *Windform* in the mid-1980s.

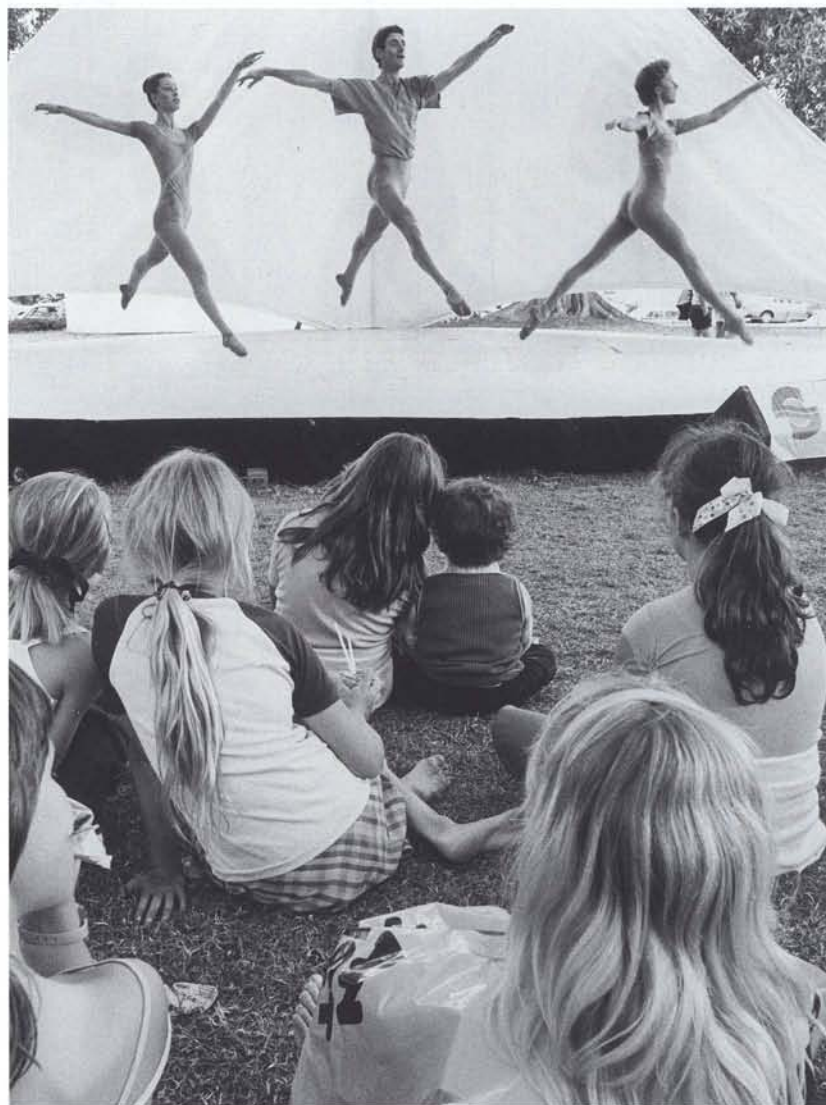
But the 1982 collaborative season with the Canberra School of Music was a landmark one. It comprised choreographed productions of *Les Noces*, Igor Stravinsky's work written in 1917 on the theme of a peasant wedding in pre-revolutionary Russia, and Iannis Xenakis's *Oresteia*, an epic account of tragedy, morality and

justice based on the trilogy of the same name by Aeschylus. Both scores were uncompromisingly contemporary and controversial, which Asker found challenging and relevant to his ideals as an artistic director. *Les Noces* had been choreographed on previous occasions, initially in 1923 by Bronislava Nijinska (sister of the celebrated Vaslav Nijinsky) for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Asker's production, however, for the first time set the work as Stravinsky had originally intended but never lived to see, with the orchestra, including four grand pianos, soloists and chorus sharing the stage with the dancers. There had never been a danced version of *Oresteia*, which was scored for a chorus of over 50, including a children's choir. Asker's version also staged *Oresteia* with musicians and chorus on stage alongside the dancers.

The Human Veins records provide a fascinating glimpse of the problems

surrounding the staging of this demanding program. There is a letter from the remarkable Xenakis, whose program biography describes him as 'Greek-born composer, architect, mathematician, resistance fighter', in which he agrees that Asker choreograph his music in Australia. That same letter has suggestions as to how to arrange the instruments on stage—woodwinds and part of the percussion on the left side, brass and the rest of the percussion on the right—along with the composer's performance notes. The records also document the difficulties Asker experienced in trying to borrow a rare contrabass clarinet, as well as the

(left to right) Liana Kirk, Don Asker and Jane Mortiss in *The End of a Dream* outdoor performance, Hyde Park, Sydney, c.1982
photographer: Régis Lansac
Manuscript Collection MS 7629/7/49/5





(left)
Don Asker (centre) with dancers
of Human Veins Dance
Theatre, c.1987
photographer: Ross Gould
Manuscript Collection MS7629/7/52/20

(right)
Scene from *Oresteia*,
Human Veins Dance Theatre, 1982
photographer: Ross Gould
Manuscript Collection MS7629/7/50/7

(right below)
Jane Mortiss and Wendy Wallace
in rehearsal for *Les Noces*
Human Veins Dance Theatre,
Canberra, 1982
photographer: Ross Gould
Manuscript Collection MS7629/7/50/9

problems of transporting from Paris (and then gathering them together again for the return journey) the unusual instruments required for *Oresteia*, which included sirens, metal flags and various metal and wooden percussion instruments and their beaters. Rehearsal schedules, call sheets, contracts, publicity, arrangements for the hire of Steinway concert grand pianos, guest lists, all indicate that the season of *Les Noces* and *Oresteia* required a staggering amount of organisation.

But as well as providing an insight into what was probably the company's most ambitious project, the Human Veins records also provide a comprehensive picture of

the day-to-day running of a small contemporary dance company. Human Veins ran many special events, school performances, fashion parades, assorted events at public functions and staged works in a variety of venues such as parks, streets and around public monuments. A glance at any annual report indicates the breadth of community coverage achieved by the company.

It was also a company that took its regional touring obligations seriously. The collection of documents that make up MS7629 shows, for example, that early in 1983 the company toured to Lithgow, Orange, Cootamundra, Leeton, Temora and Wagga Wagga with a program of

three works. Under the general title *Of Cabbages and Kings*, the program offered, as the company press release states, 'something for everyone; something vibrant, something light and funny and something romantic'. The tour and advance tour schedules for the *Cabbages and Kings* season, and for all subsequent tours, record not only the expected appointments with the media and theatre managers, the community classes—outdoor 'wake up warm up' classes, movement and jazz ballet classes for schools, and lecture demonstrations on the art of dance theatre—and the times and dates of the performances themselves, but also the relatively pedestrian, day-to-day needs of the dancers. There are notes on the location of the town's laundromat, there are various recommendations for lunch and dinner, especially cafes that stay open late ('not much open after 5.30 pm' is a common cry), and there is always a note on the location of the bank for cashing pay cheques, a necessary piece of information in the days before the ubiquitous automatic teller machine.

Human Veins disbanded in 1988 for reasons that researchers may discover among the wealth of material in the 58 boxes and 18 folio items that make up the Human Veins Dance Theatre records. Asker was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1987 and left Australia in 1988 to study the effects of technological change on dance in Asia and Europe.



The last Human Veins season was *Slices*, a lunchtime presentation of excerpts from the company's repertoire. Canberra dance, however, had only just begun. Human Veins set Canberra on a path that it has continued to follow as far as its dance culture is concerned. It established the validity of contemporary dance and perhaps even helped temper the perception that Canberra is culturally unremarkable.

MICHELLE POTTER is Curator of Dance at the National Library. She is co-producer of *Boro's Ballet*, an award-winning video about the Borovansky Ballet that draws on material from the collections of the National Library and ScreenSound Australia, and the author of the National Library publication *A Passion for Dance*. Asker was interviewed for the National Library's Oral History Program by Hilary Trotter in 1988 (TRC2341) and by Shirley McKechnie in 1991 (TRC2689)

