



As Light as Air

Decorative Dancing

Michelle Potter explores the popularity of a free, Grecian-style dance form in Australia through images found in the Library's collections

In 1924 the renowned Australian photographer Harold Cazneaux captured Miss Mary Whidborne's pupils in an open-air eurhythmic dance. The photograph, which Cazneaux subsequently called *Grecian Dance*, was cut to a semi-circular format and published in Sydney Ure Smith's magazine *The Home* in November of that year. It was accompanied by two lines of poetry:

A dancing shape, an image gay.
To haunt, to startle, and waylay.

Little has come to light to date about Mary Whidborne, other than that her pupils gave 'a successful

exhibition of eurhythmic dancing at the Conservatorium of Music, Sydney' around the time the Cazneaux photograph was published in *The Home*. But if we don't know much about Mary Whidborne, we do know that Grecian-style dancing and eurhythmics were popular recreational activities for young ladies in the 1920s and 1930s. And aspiring young dancers frequently performed these styles of free dancing at fetes and similar events.

The Papers of Moya Beaver, held by the National Library in its Manuscript Collection, contain clippings and photographs documenting such appearances by Moya Beaver and her colleagues from the First Australian Ballet, a company run by Louise Lightfoot and Mischa Burlakov in Sydney. One image, published in an unnamed newspaper, shows them dancing in a free manner, dressed in light, floating dresses. It bears the descriptive caption, 'A

picture of grace, painted by the [First] Australian Ballet at the Kambala School Fete at Rose Bay on Saturday'. Other material in the same collection shows these young women posing gracefully and decoratively in outdoor settings. Often the accompanying text refers to, or aspires to poetry: 'Graceful as the tall trees that lift their arms to the tall skies' is one example. Beaver also appeared on the cover of the magazine *Woman* in 1937 playing pan pipes and dressed as a kind of forest sylph. In that guise, as a pipe-playing sylph, she also appeared with her friends at a garden fete at Government House in Sydney in a dance entitled *A Sylvan Fantasia*.

The style of outdoor dancing captured by Cazneaux and others had a counterpart in stage productions too. Anna Pavlova created her ballet

Harold Cazneaux (1878–1953)
Grecian Dance 1924
sepia toned photograph; 18.8 x 29.2 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an2383921



Unknown photographer
Pupils of Louise Lightfoot and Mischa
Burlakov, Sydney, c.1934
Papers of Moya Beaver; Manuscript Collection

Cover of *Woman* magazine, no. 1624,
25 February 1937, in Moya Beaver's
scrapbook
Papers of Moya Beaver; Manuscript Collection

Autumn Leaves, subtitled *A Choreographic Poem*, for a premiere in South America, probably in 1919 in Rio de Janeiro, during one of her many international tours. Later, the work was brought to Australia by Pavlova when she toured here in 1926 and 1929. Pavlova performed the role of a chrysanthemum bloom buffeted by the autumn wind but partnered briefly and gloriously by a poet. Pavlova's biographer, Keith Money, says 'she demanded of the girls [who danced the leaves] an utterly untrammelled freedom of physical movement, without any hint of artificiality'.

Snippets of information about the Australian production of *Autumn Leaves* are scattered through one of

the Library's most fascinating manuscript collections, the Papers of Harcourt Algeranoff. Algeranoff danced with the Pavlova company in Australia and his close friend, Aubrey Hitchins, took the important role of the North Wind. In a letter written from Sydney in May 1926 to his mother in London, Algeranoff records something of the preparations for Hitchins' debut performance in the role: 'I am altering the costume for Aubrey for "Autumn Leaves". There really is no-one else to do it if I don't and I do so much want him to be a great success in it.'

Hitchins did score a personal success as the North Wind in his altered costume. After the Sydney opening of *Autumn Leaves*, the *Sydney Mail* recorded: 'and finely does the tall, lithe Hitchins represent the North Wind'. The newspaper also referred to the 'effective groupings' of the *Autumn Leaves*—nearly a score of handsome and graceful young people'. Photographs of Pavlova's production from programs held in the Library's Performing Arts and

Ephemera or PROMPT Collection do indeed show the Pavlova *corps de ballet* grouped together and draped decoratively in poses similar to those outdoor photographs of the 1920s by Cazneaux and others.

Edouard Borovansky also staged Pavlova's *Autumn Leaves* for his fledgling Borovansky Australian Ballet Company in its first major public appearance at the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, in December 1940. For the Borovansky production, Borovansky himself danced the role of the Poet who sweeps the Chrysanthemum into his arms. Australians Rachel Cameron and Edna Busse alternated in Pavlova's role of the Chrysanthemum, and Serge Bousloff took on the part of the North Wind. This occasion was not reported in the main press of the day as an arts event but rather as a social event attended by a bevy of important people in fashionable dress. The photographs that remain of the Borovansky production, held by the Library in its Geoffrey Ingram Archive, nevertheless continue to show poses recalling the Grecian-style movements captured by photographers in the 1920s and 1930s. No doubt Borovansky drew on his own recollections of the choreography as he had been a dancer with Pavlova and had toured with the company to Australia in 1929.

But both eurhythmics and Greek dancing were codified systems of movement, education and artistic expression that developed in the early years of the twentieth century. Eurhythmics was developed by Swiss composer and teacher Emile Jaques-Dalcroze who taught his pupils how to explore connections between movement and rhythm, and how to make music with the instrument of the human body. A Greek Dancing syllabus was codified by Ruby Ginner in London and documented in her book *The Revived Greek Dance*, first published in 1933. Ginner developed a series of specific exercises and movements that aimed 'to establish a balance between Nature and Science by developing a new being, in which the body shall in no way predominate over the brain, but be attuned faithfully to the use of the intellect'.



'Bush Scene: True Home for Sylphides', by Harold Cazneaux
 Reproduced from *Dancing round the World: Memoirs of an Attempted Escape from Ballet*
 by Arnold L. Haskell
 (London: V. Gollancz, 1937)

Her system of movement was part of the syllabus of the London-based Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing from 1924 onwards.

Did the images captured by Cazneaux, and by countless other photographers, of young women like Moya Beaver dancing as carefree nymphs in an outdoor setting reflect the ideas of pioneers of movement like Dalcroze and Ginner? Grecian-style dancing and eurhythmics were certainly advertised as part of the syllabus of dancing schools and physical culture establishments in the larger Australian cities in the early part of the twentieth century. Both dancing styles were advertised, for example, by the Langridge School of Physical Culture in Sydney in the 1920s. Reading the advertisements, however, the philosophical basis on which Dalcroze and Ginner based their systems seems not to be the main aim of the physical culture schools. One advertisement read:

Be the woman you would like to be. There is a charm about Eurhythmics and Grecian Dancing which makes an immediate appeal to lovers of beauty. Those who practice it acquire a grace of movement, suppleness of figure, and ease of carriage that is not surpassed by any other form of exercise.

As the Australian dance scholar, Lynn Fisher, has written in her study of Irene Vera Young, a pioneer of the early modern dance in Sydney, 'the differences between the functional activity and the art form were blurred'.

But for young women like Moya Beaver and her colleagues, the free dancing they were learning and performing is perhaps better seen as a genteel form of expressive dancing that interpreted the music on a personal level, whether it was seen in a truly outdoor setting or whether it was represented on the stage. The romantic image of young women dancing in outdoor surroundings was

'Scene from *Autumn Leaves*'
 Reproduced from *Anna Pavlova: Her Australian Tours, 1926, 1929*. Theatre Program
 PROMPT Collection





fostered by photographers and writers throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The British ballet writer Arnold Haskell came to Australia in 1936 with the visiting Monte Carlo Russian Ballet as a kind of publicist and reporter. His book *Dancing round the World*, published in London in 1937, is an account of his adventures on that tour. Among its many photographic plates is a reproduction of a Cazneau bush landscape captioned 'True Home for Sylphides'. Other plates are reproductions of photographs of the Russian Ballet dancers posing in groups in outdoor settings wearing costumes from *Les Sylphides*. Even Max Dupain in the 1940s perpetuated this mode of photographic expression. He took, for example, the glamorous and alluring dancers from the touring Russian Ballet companies to Frenchs Forest, north of Sydney, and photographed them against a uniquely Australian backcloth.

The enigma of Mary Whidborne remains but the Cazneau photograph of her young pupils is a resonant one. Despite the potential for it to be seen as an image reflecting a serious development in dance theory and practice, it more than likely sits within a popular tradition in which the romantic and the poetic held sway.

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(above) 'M. Aubrey Hitchens, as he appears as the North Wind in the delightful ballet *Autumn Leaves* to be given during the great dancer's season' Reproduced from J.C. Williamson Ltd program, His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, PROMPT Collection

(below) Rachel Cameron in *Autumn Leaves*, Borovansky Ballet, 1940 Production photograph from Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet 1926-1980 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an25107542