

Michelle Potter describes how a valuable new arts database hosted by the National Library of Australia was the catalyst for the reunion of an acclaimed ballerina and her hitherto undiscovered second family

Finding biographical information about Australian choreographers, dancers, artistic directors and others working in the field of Australian dance has never been an easy task. No publishing house has ever accepted the risk of publishing a dictionary devoted purely to those who have made the Australian dance profession the vibrant force that it is. Enter Australia Dancing (www.australiadancing.org), a web portal hosted by the National Library of Australia. Not only does Australia Dancing fill a publishing gap of major proportions, it also makes a vast collection of dance resources available to people who may never have the opportunity to visit the Library to use those resources on site. What's more, the Library, in making its dance resources so visible and easily accessible to the worldwide community, is the source of a very human story—one that culminated in August 2004 in the reunification of a Russian family after 75 years.

The story of Australia Dancing began back in the mid 1990s when Ausdance, Australia's peak industry body for dance, identified the need for a project to preserve Australia's dance heritage, in particular its screen-based heritage. With funding from the Australia Council, a collaborative endeavour was launched in 1997 between Ausdance, ScreenSound Australia and the National Library. A project manager, located at ScreenSound, was appointed and work began to locate old film and videotape. This footage came from inside cupboards and under beds across Australia. A lot arrived in old video formats and, sadly, some tape was actually beyond salvation. But some was able to be 'baked' so that image and sound did not disappear entirely. What remained was copied onto new, broadcast quality tape. Some important moments in Australia's dance history were saved, even if quality of image and sound were well below present standards.

Some treasures also emerged from the existing ScreenSound collection as the



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location and copying of dance footage already in its vaults began. Who would have thought that a film, whose significance had gone unrecognised and which consisted of three dances choreographed in Australia by Gertrud Bodenwieser, the Vienna-born pioneer of modern dance, would emerge from obscurity as a result of this project? *Central Australian Suite* was one of those dances. It is a choreographic meditation on the harsh life of the Australian outback and is a moving work from a woman who struggled to find meaning in a new country that she loved, yet referred to as 'a beautiful cultural desert'.

As a partner in the project, the National Library offered support in two main areas.

Portrait of Coralie Hinkley, of the Bodenwieser Ballet, dancing in a park
b&w photograph
From the papers of Gertrud Bodenwieser, 1919–1997, Series 2 Manuscripts Collection,
nla.ms-ms9263-2-17x



above:
Homepage of Australia Dancing
(www.australiadancing.org)

top:
Margaret Chapple, Mardi
Watchorn, Coralie Hinkley and
Moira Claux in *Slavonic Dance*,
Bodenwieser Ballet
b&w photograph
From the papers of Gertrud
Bodenwieser, 1919–1997, Series 2
Manuscripts Collection,
nla.ms-ms9263-2-16x

The Library agreed to acquire new material as it came to hand, especially if, as often happened, it was part of a mixed collection containing film or video material as well as paper-based items. The moving image material was acquired by ScreenSound while associated, paper-based items were acquired by the Library. The Library also agreed to create some new material and a collection of oral history interviews was recorded. Those interviewed included former Bodenwieser dancers, Coralie Hinkley and Shona Dunlop MacTavish. Their recollections added context to the newly discovered and acquired films.

Next, in order to link related material across the two collecting institutions, the

Library offered to create an online directory. This directory was set up to describe the dance resources in the two institutions and to allow for online publication of a series of short biographical texts about Australian dance companies, dancers, choreographers and others working in the field. Where possible, links to catalogue records and other online resources were made available, although the directory was never meant to be a catalogue in itself. No-one could quite predict it at the time, but this particular facet of the National Library's support was to become the jewel in the crown of the project. Over four years visits to the online directory grew steadily so that by 2001 it was receiving around 6000 visits per month. The arts community around the world had been crying out for the kind of information the directory provided.

In 2002 the project relocated to the Library and the directory began its transformation into Australia Dancing, a searchable database with many more links to the Library's various online resources than had previously been possible. By 2003 the new service was ready to be launched and since then it has more than justified the

faith the Library had in it. Visits have continued to grow. In the financial year 2003–2004 Australia Dancing received 150 230 visits generating close to half-a-million separate searches. Most visits came from Australia and the United States, but there were some surprises. Countries accessing the portal included most of those making up the expanded European Union but also, quite unexpectedly, countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

But what of the reunited Russian family? While statistics justify the Library's commitment to making its dance resources accessible through online services, especially through Australia Dancing, one story goes beyond mere measurement and indicates that these online services can have an almost unimaginable impact. This Russian story began with an email enquiry from a researcher in Moscow who wanted to access the transcript of an oral history interview with Tamara Tchinarova Finch, an interview recorded for the Library in 1994 while Finch was visiting Australia from London on a lecture tour for the Australian Ballet.

Finch was born Tamara Rekemchouk in 1919 in Romania. In 1926, aged six, she arrived in Paris with her parents who were seeking to distance themselves from the Soviet occupation of their country. In Paris she took dancing lessons from Russian émigré ballerinas who had set up studios there, having themselves escaped from Russia during the October revolution. But while she was still a young child, her father returned to the Soviet Union. He was 'idealistic' Finch said in a recent autobiographical article published in January 2004 in the American dance journal *Dance Chronicle*, and wanted 'to help build a new society there'. Finch and her mother, 'staunchly anti-Bolshevik', decided to stay in Paris and never saw him again. Finch took her mother's name and, as Tamara Tchinarova, came to Australia in 1936 on tour with the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, and again in 1938 with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet. At the end of that 1938 tour she decided to remain in Australia where, over the next few years, she danced with a number of newly formed Australian companies including the Kirsova Ballet and the Borovansky Ballet. In Sydney she met and married the actor Peter Finch, whose name she still uses, preferring it now to

Tchinarova, the name by which she was known during her dancing career. Since retiring from dancing and making her home in London, Finch has acted as interpreter for many English-speaking dance companies, including the Australian Ballet, during tours to Russia, and for Russian companies touring in the West. She has also pursued a career as a dance writer and has been published in a range of dance magazines, notably London's *Dancing Times*.

The email enquiry concerned a book that was being written in Moscow and an attempt by the author and his daughter to identify several photos of a young girl. The photos belonged to the author's father

bottom:

Serge Ismailoff, Anna Volkova, Oleg Tupine, Tamara Tchinarova and Paul Petroff riding bicycles during the Covent Garden Russian Ballet Australian Tour, c.1938
Papers of Tamara Finch, Manuscripts Collection MS 9733/5/19

below:

Max Dupain (1911–1992)
Portrait of Evelyn Ippen, Bettina Vernon, Emmy Towsey and Shona Dunlop from the Bodenwieser Ballet [c.1939]
gelatin silver photograph; 38.8 x 47.0 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an12114799





above:
Tamara Tchinarova [c.1939]
b&w photograph; 18.4 x 24.7 cm
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of
Australian Ballet
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24848742

right:
Portrait of Tamara Tchinarova,
aged 11 years, in costume for
charity recitals of Olga Preobrajenska
Paris, January 1931
Papers of Tamara Finch, Manuscripts
Collection MS 9733/5/2



whose life ended in a Stalinist prison in 1937. The enquiry sparked a flurry of activity in the Oral History and Music and Dance Branches of the Library, as well as many more emails, letters and phone calls. The outcome was astonishing. The young girl in the unidentified photos was Tamara Tchinarova and the subject of the book was the father, Ersery Rekemchouk, who had left Paris for the Soviet Union all those years ago. He had died in that Stalinist prison in 1937 and the photos were items that had been secretly kept as mementos by Rekemchouk's second wife. The author of the book, which is still in preparation, was Ersery Rekemchouk's son and Tamara Finch's half-brother. Finch was given copies of the correspondence and contact details and has since been in touch with her newly found family in Moscow. She finds it almost

impossible to believe that after almost 75 years she has found a family she had no idea existed.

Australia Dancing was never meant to be a static site and the content of the database continues to grow as new acquisitions are made, existing material is described, and more biographies are created. Statistics continue to be encouraging and suggest that what Australia Dancing provides is eagerly sought after by the worldwide community. But nothing can ever measure up to the emotional voice of Tamara Finch at the end of a phone line saying 'Thank you, my dear'.

MICHELLE POTTER is the National Library's Curator of Dance and was the recipient of the 2003 Australian Dance Award for services to dance. Australia Dancing is online at www.australiadancing.org