



Challenging Perceptions

above left: Hélène Kirsova and Igor Youskevitch in *Le Carnaval*, for the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet 1937
black and white photograph;
19.7 x 16.0 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3457621

above right: Dickinson-Monteath Studio
Studio portrait of Milos Ristic from the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, in costume, Melbourne, Victoria 1937
black and white photograph;
21.4 x 16.1 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3466088

Michelle Potter examines the impact that three touring Ballets Russes companies had on Australian audiences

‘Colonel de Basil’s Monte Carlo Russian Ballet comes as a vitalising experience to a country so young in artistic endeavour and achievement’, wrote a journalist for Brisbane’s *Courier Mail* in 1937. The visit of the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, the first of three Ballets Russes companies to tour in Australia and New Zealand, was indeed a vitalising experience for Australian audiences and Australians working in the arts. This company, which toured between 1936 and 1937, and the two that followed it in quick succession—the Covent Garden Russian Ballet in 1938 to 1939 and the Original Ballet Russe in 1939 to 1940—brought to Australia a panorama of dance, music and design of unprecedented modernity.

The companies could trace their heritage back to the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev. Diaghilev’s aesthetic of artistic change had challenged prevailing standards when his own ballet company burst onto the scene in Paris in 1909. Each of the three companies that toured Australia brought new choreographic, musical and visual experiences, which in their turn challenged Australian perceptions of the performing arts. Ballets Russes seasons were eagerly anticipated across the country.

The cream of society was also out in force for every opening night, dressed in the most expensive gowns and ready to use the opportunity for promotional and entertainment purposes. In 1936, *The Sydney Morning Herald* carried the following announcement after the opening of the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet in Sydney:

A lovely Schiaparelli gown of chalk white suede crepe, beautifully tailored, was worn by Mrs Charles Lloyd-Jones with a short cape, square shouldered, of quilted taffeta. She wore pearls

and diamonds and diamond earrings ... Mr. and Mrs Charles Lloyd-Jones entertained a supper party at their home, Rosemont, Woollahra, after the ballet, and their sons, Charles and David, left yesterday morning for Bowral, where they will remain for a fortnight.

But if Australians were fascinated by the artistry and the glamour of the Ballets Russes, and by the sense of occasion that the seasons provided, the dancers in their turn were fascinated by their Australian experiences. In December 1936, an article published in the Melbourne weekly *Table Talk* recorded the apparent excitement of the dancers as they were preparing to leave London for Australia a few months earlier.

And suddenly this trip became a reality when gentle Mr Nevin Tait brought to a rehearsal some Australian journalists to interview the artists ... From this moment the excitement grew every day. Unable to control their joy the artists rushed to the shops, some buying summer dresses and parasols, and others spending their money on fur coats, the particulars about the weather being rather contradictory.

And once in Australia the dancers of all three of the visiting Ballets Russes companies threw themselves into social activities on their weekly rest from performing. They went on picnics, enjoyed swimming parties and were invited to spend time at the homes of new-found Australian friends. Irina Baronova, one of the major stars to come to Australia on the second tour, gives her thoughts in an oral history interview recorded for the Library in 1994:

It was interesting to see a new country, to see the new nature, the new animals. Every spare moment we would dash for the koala bears because they hug you, you know. And very quickly we made a lot of friends because we found the Australians so warm and friendly and they approach you ... they come and they introduce themselves and they talk to you and they are so warm and hospitable that very quickly, in every town, we made friends.

Two recent National Library acquisitions reveal in a little more detail the nature of these friendly encounters. One is an album of photographs assembled by a medical doctor, Dr Ewan Murray-Will. Murray-Will was a dermatologist with a private practice in Sydney's Macquarie Street. He was also honorary dermatologist to a number of Sydney hospitals, including Sydney Hospital, St Vincent's Hospital and the Coast Hospital (later Prince Henry Hospital). He was reputedly a shy man and did not produce a family of his own, but a select group of Ballets Russes dancers became a little like a family to him. He was close to a small coterie of dancers, among them Helene Kirsova, Paul Petroff, Nina Youchkevitch and Milos Ristic, all of whom feature frequently in photographs in his album. They appear in candid snapshots as well as in portraits and performance shots. Together Murray-Will and the dancers visited wildlife sanctuaries where they enjoyed feeding kangaroos and wombats and cuddling koalas, and went on bush picnics where they posed amid Australian flora.

below: Nina Youchkevitch, Milos Ristic and Irina Bondireva (left to right) from the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, patting a wombat c.1936 black and white photograph; 8.4 x 10.9 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3454942



left: Nina Youchkevitch and Milos Ristic (centre) with Irina Bondireva (right) and a friend from the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, feeding a kangaroo c.1936 black and white photograph; 8.2 x 11.0 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3454933





above left: Maurice Seymour (1904–1993)
Irina Baronova in costume for *Swan Lake* Ballet Russes 1939
black and white photograph;
24.2 x 19.1 cm
Geoffrey Ingram archive of Australian Ballet
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24830090

above right: Max Dupain (1911–1992)
Portrait of Paul Petroff sitting in shadow c.1930s
black and white photograph;
24.6 x 19.1 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3535942

right: Tamara Tchinarova (left) and Nina Youckkevitch (centre) from the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet standing with an unknown woman at Bungan beach, New South Wales c.1936
black and white photograph;
11.1 x 6.7 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3462906

Murray-Will's weekend retreat at Bungan Beach, north of Sydney, was the venue for beach parties, and the beach was also the setting for some of Murray-Will's experiments with a hand-held movie camera. This footage, often shot in slow motion and often showing the dancers in swimming



costumes performing excerpts from the Ballets Russes repertoire, is now in the collection of the National Film and Sound Archive and complements the images in the Library's newly acquired photograph album.

Another Ballets Russes collection, acquired recently by the Library, documents the career of Elisabeth Souvorova, a corps de ballet dancer who came to Australia in 1936 on the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet tour. The core of the collection is some 70 letters and postcards sent by Souvorova to her mother in England. The letters were written on the boat to Australia from every capital city visited by the company in Australia and New Zealand, and on the boat on the way back to Europe.

Although Souvorova was not always entirely fulsome in her praise of Australia and its people, she did warm to her situation during the nine-month tour, and from the beginning, like her colleagues, was impressed by the warmth and generosity of Australians. In 1936, in Adelaide early in the tour she wrote:

All the people are frightful, tho' very friendly & hospitable, & we have been taken for drives in the cars of complete strangers almost daily. In

one flower shop where I went to buy a bunch of primroses I was presented with an enormous bouquet of mixed flowers gratis.

Not long after, while still in Adelaide, she wrote again, entranced, as were Murray-Will's friends, by the flora and fauna:

Since I wrote last we have all been very social—on Saturday we had a party at the Morris's house—Et Sunday we went on a picnic, about fifteen people in six cars, with various people I had never met! We went to the most lovely place in the mountains, Et I have never seen so many fruit trees Et wild flowers—Et even paraqueets [sic] flying about. We had a marvellous lunch, they built fires Et grilled chops Et sausages Et [we] ate until we nearly died. The scenery is really exquisite—we found lots of wild orchids—everywhere are eucalyptus trees, which they call blue gum trees, Et also mimosa, but it isn't out yet. In the evening we went to a large party at a russian doctors house, a marvellous house, Et such food!

Similar letters came from Melbourne, Sydney and elsewhere, always full of the new experiences, gifts received, parties enjoyed. These letters are a poignant but forthright glimpse at the life of a dancer on tour and record not just Souvorova's perceptions of Australian life and culture, but also more than a little company gossip and much



about the repertoire and the roles Souvorova danced in Australia.

For many years the Ballets Russes tours to Australia have rightly been regarded as a major cultural event in the history of ballet, and indeed of the arts in general in Australia. They opened up a new world to Australians working across the arts.

Choreographers, composers, designers, painters, printmakers and photographers, in fact artists working in most disciplines, took up the challenge and created new work of their own inspired by what they saw and heard on stage. But much of the remaining record of these tours also indicates that the dancers were engaged at a personal level

with their adoring Australian public. On this level there was a mutual fascination, a shared enjoyment of what Australia had to offer and what Europe sent to the other side of the world.

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Dr Ewan Murray-Will (foreground left) with friends and dancers from the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, Sydney c.1936
black and white photograph;
7.0 x 11.4 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3535694

Joseph Ringland Anderson (1894–1961)
Hélène Kirsova as the Doll in
Petrouchka, Monte Carlo Russian
Ballet, Melbourne 1937
black and white photograph;
15.9 x 11.7 cm
Dr Ewan Murray-Will album
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3454914

