



A Dash of Helpmann

Michelle Potter has uncovered some of the balletomane's flamboyance in the Oral History and Manuscript collections

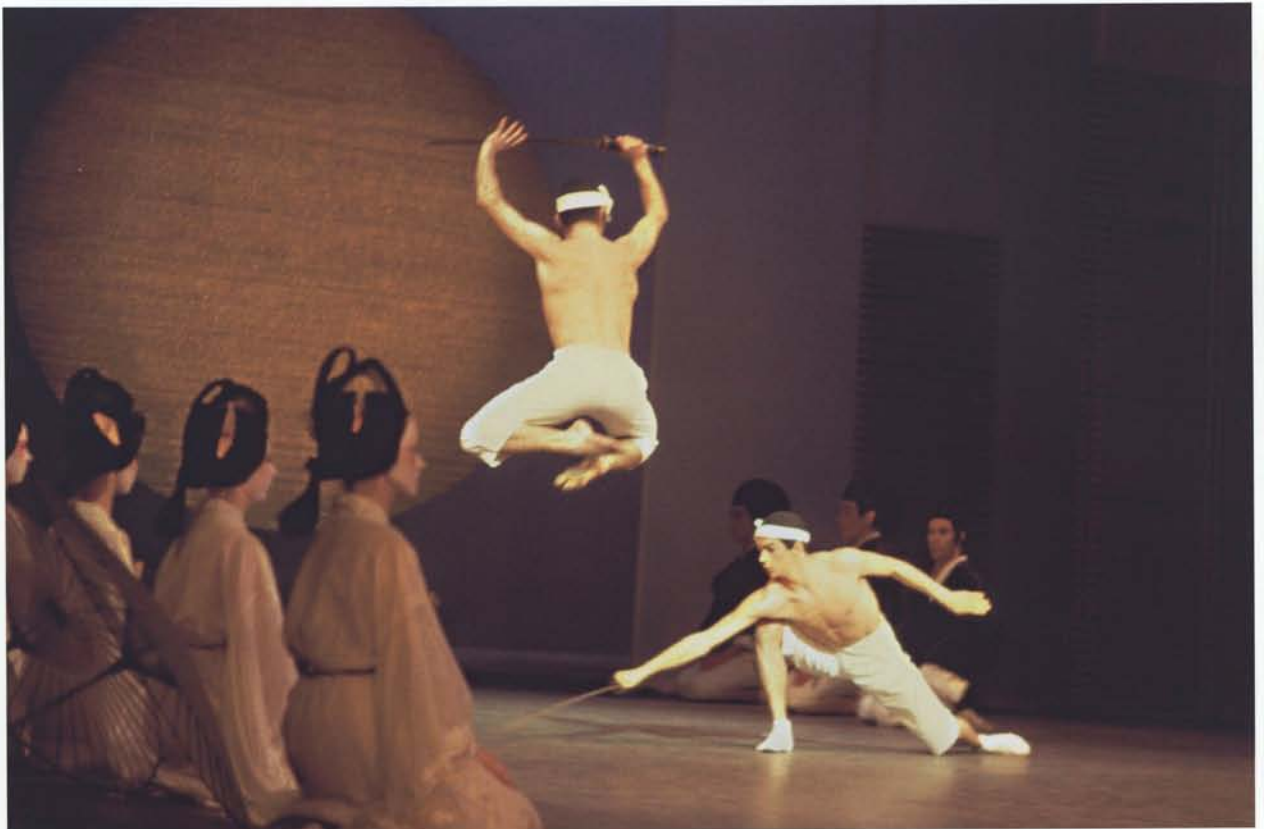
Robert Helpmann was born in Mount Gambier, South Australia, but his career took him around the world. His name became an international one, synonymous with theatricality. He worked across art forms, appearing in ballet, drama, revue and film, and he was skilled not just as a performer but as a choreographer and director as well. He worked, too, with the most celebrated artists in his various fields of endeavour. His partnership

with a young Margot Fonteyn was legendary. His friendship and professional association with Katharine Hepburn led him to dedicate his well-known Australian ballet *The Display* to her. And his connections with the cinematographer Geoffrey Unsworth resulted in the highly successful dance film *Don Quixote*, which starred Rudolf Nureyev, Lucette Aldous and artists of the Australian Ballet.

Helpmann was also a consummate storyteller and built a mystique around even the earliest periods in his performing life. Some of his childhood experiences at Nora Stewart's dancing school in Adelaide, for example, are recorded in an oral history interview made in 1974 by Hazel de Berg and located in the National Library's Oral History Collection:

Angus McBean (1904–1990)
Portrait of Robert Helpmann,
London [c. 1945]
Robert Helpmann Papers (1933–86)
Manuscript Collection MS 7161

[Miss Stewart] said, 'But I've never had a boy to dance before'. So I said, 'That doesn't matter. I want to come to your ballet classes.' So she said, 'Well, all right, you can.' But, of course, never having had a boy pupil, I had to learn all the dances for the little girls, and dance on my pointes, and of course when it came time for her annual display, I had to dance in them because I was better than any of them. And so I always appeared as a little girl, on my pointes. And at the end of the number I would take off my wig, and this was a great success with the audience.



His father's meeting with Anna Pavlova—a highly influential event in the young Helpmann's life—has always been part of Helpmann's storytelling and also features in his oral history interview:

[My father] went on a business trip to Melbourne when I was 14 and when he came back he said, 'You're always wanting to be a dancer. There's a girl dancing in Melbourne and she's got a company and I've been to see her, and she's going to take you into the company.' Next week, I left for Melbourne with my mother and the 'girl' was Anna Pavlova. By the time it dawned on me to try and ask why and how he got into her dressing room, and why she took me as a student, both my father and Pavlova had died.

I sat and watched her every night for 15 months, and to me she was just unbelievable. But I learnt from her. I used to go into the theatre at about half past five and, standing on a barely lit stage, covered in woollen tights and woollen pullovers and shawls, would be this lonely figure practising right up to the moment they called 'quarter of an hour' before the performance. Then she would leave the stage and a few minutes later come back, this magic creature, and I realised then the

tremendous, hard, gruelling, cruel work the ballet involves.

Probably Helpmann's most significant contribution to the development of theatre in Australia was his time with the Australian Ballet. Helpmann joined Peggy van Praagh at the helm of the fledgling national company in 1965, was her co-director until 1974 and sole director throughout 1975. The Geoffrey Ingram Papers, held in the Library's Manuscripts Collection at MS 7336, contain a wealth of unique, unpublished material relating to Helpmann's appointment and directorship of the company. Letters and other items record, for example, that he was initially appointed for one year and was required to be in the country for not less than three months. His fee was A£2,000 plus various allowances. They also record that Helpmann originally argued for being in Australia for only six weeks each year, while remarking that his home was in London.

Other letters indicate that van Praagh was not entirely happy with the appointment of Helpmann as her co-director. She believed, perhaps with some justification, that she would be doing all the hard work

while Helpmann would be taking much of the credit. In fact, other documents make it quite clear that, at least initially, Helpmann was appointed largely for reasons of publicity, for the attraction of that internationally famous name. His methods of working were quite idiosyncratic, and certainly different from van Praagh's, as company ballet master, Ray Powell, has set down in an interview recorded for the Library by Bill Stephens in 1993:

I always thought of Bobby as a P.R. man. Dame Peggy did all the casting and the rehearsals and Bobby liked to walk in and give a conference and have a look at the rehearsal and leave. He was never interested in the everyday running of the company, except for future repertoire planning.

During and immediately prior to his directorship, Helpmann did, however, contribute in a major creative way to the development of the Australian Ballet. He choreographed several ballets for the company, which were taken overseas during the company's early tours to Europe and the United Kingdom. They brought considerable publicity to both Helpmann and the company.



(left) Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
Artists of the Australian Ballet
in Robert Helpmann's *Yugen* [1965]
35 mm colour slide
W.F. Stringer Collection. Album 1016/6
Pictures Collection

(above) Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
Artists of the Australian Ballet
in *Don Quixote* [c. 1979]
35 mm colour slide
W.F. Stringer Collection [slides]. Album 1016/4
Pictures Collection

(right) Gordon Anthony (1902–1989)
Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann,
Giselle, Act 1 [c. 1937]
b&w photograph; 14 x 8.9 cm
Pictures Collection PIC/6505



Two works in particular, *The Display* (1964) and the Japanese-inspired *Yugen* (1965), were important early successes for the Australian Ballet. But, as was usual where Helpmann was concerned, there was controversy behind the creation and performance of these ballets, particularly with *The Display*. Again the Library's collections provide unusual insights. The Ingram material records that the novelist Patrick White was originally approached to write the scenario for *The Display* but when the White libretto arrived Helpmann disliked it intensely. Van Praagh was not entirely happy either and it was



Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
 Barry Kitcher as The Male in Robert
 Helpmann's *The Display* [1964]
 35 mm colour slide
 W.F. Stringer Collection. Album 1016/6
 Pictures Collection

eventually rejected. Sadly, the Ingram Papers do not contain a copy of White's work but the ongoing saga of the scenario—and in the end it was Helpmann's own story that was used—caused delays with the writing of the musical score, which could not be started until the story had been agreed upon.

Eventually Helpmann would claim that *The Display*, with his own choreography and scenario, music by Malcolm Williamson and designs by Sidney Nolan, was the first fully Australian ballet. 'I am very proud that this should be the first 100 per cent Australian ballet that has been choreographed', he told Hazel de Berg on the eve of the premiere at the Adelaide Festival in 1964. This was clearly a flamboyant, Helpmannesque piece of publicity as many ballets with Australian music,

choreography and design had been created before *The Display*. The newly naturalised Edouard Borovansky had, for example, created *Terra Australis* with designs by Eve Harris and music by Esther Rofe in 1946 and Laurel Martyn had made her *Sentimental Bloke* with designs by Charles Bush and music by Esther Rofe in 1952.

Nevertheless, *The Display* was ostentatiously Australian and was at least the first 100 per cent Australian ballet to be created for the flagship company. Set in the Dandenong Ranges of Victoria during a bush picnic, the ballet explored themes of hostility and aggression in Australian society. It even featured an Aussie Rules football game and the dancers were coached for this part of the ballet by the football star Ron Barassi. Helpmann's scrapbooks, held by the Library in its Manuscripts Collection

as MS 7161, show that the work received a mixed critical reception both in Australia and overseas. Headlines from newspaper reviews of the premiere range in tone from 'New Ballet a "Shocker"' to '*The Display* is a Triumph'. But perhaps the ballet's most interesting reception was in Glasgow, where the work was performed during the Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1965. The ballet's sexual overtones incurred the wrath of the Church and the Glasgow Presbytery only narrowly voted out a move to have the ballet banned.

Although probably none of his other works created such a stir as *The Display*, Helpmann continued to choreograph for the Australian Ballet throughout his term as director. In 1966 he mounted his stark and savage production of *Elektra*, with designs by Arthur Boyd, which had originally been created for London's Royal Ballet in 1963. In 1968 he created the dramatic and virtuosic *Sun Music* with music by Peter Sculthorpe and décor by Kenneth Rowell. *Perisynthyon* followed in 1974. While directing the company he also took to the stage himself, dancing the role of The Dago in the Australian Ballet's production of *Façade*, a role he had previously danced in England with Margot Fonteyn, and starring as one of the Ugly Sisters in the company's production of *Cinderella*.

Robert Helpmann has been the subject of several books and many articles. The unique material in the National Library, however, provides much behind-the-scenes material for future research into the life of the man who for many years was Australia's most prominent theatrical figure and who certainly provided the Australian Ballet with a colourful figurehead.

MICHELLE POTTER is the Library's Curator of Dance. Her book, *A Collector's Book of Australian Dance* will be released this month by the National Library