

INSPIRING MENTORS

VALRENE TWEEDIE AND LAUREL MARTYN



Michelle Potter describes the contribution of two great figures of Australian dance

Leone Vining Brown (b.1930)
Margaret Barr Dance Drama group, 1972
Records of Ballet Australia, 1960–1976
Manuscript Collection MS 9171
Courtesy of Shane Vining Brown

At regular intervals the role of women in dance becomes a topic for discussion by dance commentators publishing in both the print and electronic media. Why are there so few women choreographers? Is there a place in today's society for the glamorous ballerina epitomised by former stars such as Margot Fonteyn? Is dance a male-dominated or female-dominated art form? Do men hold all the plum jobs? Dance in both its current practice and past history generates hotly contested debates on issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual politics and the like.

While many of the best known figures in the development of Australian dance have been men—historically, Edouard Borovansky and Robert Helpmann come to mind immediately—over the years many women have also provided strong leadership roles. The work of a

number of them is well documented in the National Library's Collection. The English-born Peggy van Praagh, founding artistic director of the Australian Ballet, and the Viennese modern dance pioneer Gertrud Bodenwieser, who brought her expressionist dance to Australia in 1939, are striking examples. The careers of both van Praagh and Bodenwieser are represented by substantial collections that cross the range of the Library's collecting areas. However, two Australian-born women, Valrene Tweedie and Laurel Martyn, also stand out for the contributions they have made across several decades.

Both Tweedie and Martyn had performing careers outside of their native country but both also returned to nurture Australian dancers and foster Australian choreography and performance. The careers of both are

well documented in the Library and this material highlights the strength of their engagement with dance and, in particular, their determination to establish a creative environment for the production of new work.

Sydney-born Tweedie left Australia in 1940, aged 15, with the Original Ballet Russe at the conclusion of that company's hugely successful Australia tour. For the next decade or so she danced across North and South America with an assortment of companies until she returned to direct the Melbourne-based National Theatre Ballet for seasons from 1953 to 1955. With the National she also choreographed and performed as one of the company's leading dancers.

But it was in the 1960s and 1970s that Tweedie made a singular contribution to choreographic development in Australia. In 1960 she established Ballet Australia, an organisation designed to encourage new Australian choreography, music and design and to provide opportunities for this new work to be performed. Tweedie was a visionary in this regard and even today her



(top)
Valrene Tweedie in costume for
Symphonie Fantastique. De Basil's Ballet
Russe, Chicago 1940-41
1 of 10 photographs: gelatin silver;
17 x 22 cm or smaller
Pictorial Collection P1941/1

(bottom)
Leone Vining Brown (b.1930)
John Meehan and Franz Verenne with
choreographer Dorothy Steane (reflected
in mirror), Ballet Australia
Choreographic Seminar 1973
Records of Ballet Australia, 1960-1976
Manuscript Collection MS 9171
Courtesy of Shane Vining Brown

broad outlook has rarely been equalled. Although the name Ballet Australia suggests a particular stylistic focus, Tweedie nurtured and encouraged choreographers working across a variety of dance styles from ballet to jazz, modern to primitive. She was a facilitator who provided artists with a creative environment in which to experiment and to grow.

Ballet Australia gave its first performance in December 1960 at Sydney's Elizabethan Theatre. Four works were shown: Tweedie's *Overture for Dancers*, Ruth Galene's *Cantilena*, Judith Burgess' *Bartok Sonata* and Joan Halliday's *Sea Interludes*. Over the next several years, Ballet Australia presented a staggering array of new choreography, often with commissioned scores from some of Australia's leading composers. The period 1961 to 1962 was particularly productive musically. In three seasons, eight dance works were produced using music by contemporary Australian composers. Six of the eight works were danced to brand new scores commissioned by Ballet Australia from John Antill, Nigel Butterley, Kurt Herweg, Bruce Lawrence, Richard Meale and John Milful.

In 1964 choreographic workshops replaced the earlier Ballet Australia format of full-scale productions, and 1969 saw the first annual choreographic competition. This first competition was won by Nanette Hassall, who went on to establish her own performing career in the United States and the United Kingdom before returning to Australia in the 1980s to establish the Melbourne-based company Dance Works. Hassall is currently head of the dance department at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, Perth. Winners in subsequent years also went on to develop choreographic and directorial careers. They included Ian Spink,

(opposite)
Laurel Martyn in her dressing-room,
1946
1 of c.865 photographs
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian
Ballet
Pictorial Collection

who in the 1980s co-founded Second Stride, a small contemporary dance company in the United Kingdom, and John Meehan, currently directing American Ballet Theatre's second company.

Tweedie's Ballet Australia appeared to have run its course by the mid-1970s and was dissolved in 1977. By the 1970s the Australian dance scene had changed dramatically. The flagship company, the Australian Ballet, was into its second decade of operation and a number of strong, regional dance companies had blossomed. Tweedie's leadership in encouraging broadly based choreographic development remains, however, remarkable.

Laurel Martyn's early dance training was in Queensland, but she left for England in the mid-1930s, while still in her teens, and continued her training in London before beginning a performing career with the Vic-Wells Ballet. It was in London that Martyn's own choreographic skills began to blossom. In 1935 her ballet *Sigrid* won second prize in the Pavlova Casket choreographic competition. On her return to Australia, Martyn danced with the Borovansky Ballet in its early years, before leaving it in 1946 to establish her own company, Ballet Guild.

Martyn was a prolific choreographer herself, and while she did encourage and produce the work of many other choreographers for Ballet Guild, and did reproduce some of the best-known classics of the ballet repertoire, Ballet Guild was also an important stage for her own work. In the 1940s and 1950s Martyn choreographed some of her best-known pieces on Australian themes, including *The Sentimental Bloke* in 1952 and *Mathinna*, the story of a young Aboriginal girl's entry into white society, in 1954. Between 1946 and 1976 when Ballet Guild (by then renamed Ballet Victoria) folded, Martyn had created over 25 original works herself. This was unlike Tweedie, who choreographed extensively for television in the 1960s and 1970s, but only rarely made works for Ballet Australia.

Nevertheless, the history of Ballet Guild reflects Martyn's overwhelming belief in the importance of establishing a creative environment in which new dance could flourish. As it was with Tweedie, one of Martyn's greatest contributions was her championing of Australian composers. *The Sentimental Bloke* was danced to a score by John Tallis; *Mathinna* to the music of Esther Rofe. Other Australian composers who worked with Martyn and Ballet Guild included John Antill, Dorian le Gallienne and Margaret Sutherland. The two women, Rofe and Sutherland, each made two works for Ballet Guild. In addition to *Mathinna*, Rofe created the music for *L'Amour enchantée* in 1950, and Sutherland composed music used in *Dithyramb* (1946) and *The Selfish Giant* (1947).

Unlike Ballet Australia, however, Ballet Guild continued throughout its life to present full-scale productions rather than the choreographic workshops and seminars that became a feature of Ballet Australia's later years. As a result, Martyn also commissioned stage and costume designs from leading Australian theatre designers including William Constable, Leonard French, Barry Kay, Alan McCulloch, Kenneth Rowell and John Truscott.

In its final years, Martyn's company succeeded in bringing major guest stars to Australia, the most eminent being Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova, who guested in 1975 having only recently arrived in the West. The following year Galina and Valery Panov, also recent defectors from the Soviet Union, danced with the company. But the



future of the company was shaky. Financial and political issues had begun to impinge, and by 1976 the vision which Martyn had nurtured was in shreds. As Martyn commented in an oral history interview recorded for the Library in 1989:

I'm not a politician. I haven't a politician's bone in my body. And that is a big drawback. If I'd had more of that in me perhaps Ballet Guild might have grown bigger and done what my vision for it was. But I think the creativity that we had was very worthwhile.

Martyn's contribution through Ballet Guild cannot, however, be underestimated. Like Tweedie, her vision was the creation of Australian dance, preferably in conjunction with Australian composers and designers.

Tweedie and Martyn have both continued to contribute to the development of dance in Australia, well into their 'retirement'. Martyn, now aged 86, has recently completed work on the second edition of her

book about educating young dancers, *Let Them Dance*. Tweedie, in her 70s, appeared recently as guest artist with the Australian Ballet in cameo roles in two productions: Graeme Murphy's revitalised version of *Nutcracker* and Stephen Baynes' *Requiem*.

These two remarkable women have enhanced Australian dance with their commitment and vision, and with their ability to act as inspiring mentors and facilitators.

MICHELLE POTTER is Curator of Dance at the National Library. She previously authored the Library's publication *A Passion for Dance* and is currently compiling *A Collector's Book of Australian Dance*, due for release in October

The records of Ballet Australia are held as MS 9171, and a collection of photographs and musical scores has recently been acquired from Laurel Martyn. Tweedie and Martyn were both interviewed as part of the Esso Performing Arts and Oral History Archive Project: Tweedie's interview is at TRC 2347, and Martyn's at TRC 2444.

(right)

Laurel Martyn in *Vltava*, 1940
1 of c.865 photographs
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet
Pictorial Collection

(below)

Valrene Tweedie (14 years old) with Colonel de Basil after being accepted for his ballet company, Sydney, 1940
1 of 10 photographs: gelatin silver;
17 x 22 cm or smaller
Pictorial Collection P1941/3

