



## THE PAPERS OF IVY SCHILLING

above:  
Ivy Schilling and Fred Leslie,  
1920. Dancers  
1 of 7 gelatin silver photographs,  
halftone photogravure;  
20.5 x 15.5 cm or less  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an10573226-1

top right:  
Ivy Schilling and Fred Leslie  
Photograph by  
Malcolm Arbuthnot  
Manuscript Collection,  
MS 6410/2

right:  
Ivy Schilling in *Maggie*, 1920  
Photograph by Luke Falk  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 6410/1

Michelle Potter looks at the career of a once household name in Australian dancing

Many of the National Library's smaller collections of manuscripts and personal papers contain surprises. They bring to light stories from the past about artists who, while immensely popular in their time, have been all but forgotten today: dancer Ivy Schilling, for example. The papers of Ivy Schilling, preserved in the Library's Manuscript Collection at MS 6410, occupy just five folders and consist of newspaper clippings, a scrapbook, an autograph book and a collection of photos. They reveal not just the career of a dancer but the life of a feisty woman with strong opinions and some unusual achievements in her list of credits. The Schilling collection provides a glimpse of a woman who was hailed in the Australian press in the 1910s as 'a Bernhardt

of dancing and unquestionably the greatest exponent of the ancient art that Australia has yet produced', but who was also reported in the newspapers around the same time as the first Australian actress to be granted a licence to drive a motorcar.

Schilling was born in Melbourne in 1892. Her determination to make a career as a dancer was clear early on in her life. Convincing her mother to allow her to take dance classes was the first hurdle, as one undated clipping from her scrapbooks records: 'She pleaded in a kitchen eight years ago. Just a plain, everyday kitchen one finds in any modern day house. She, whose destiny was to be decided that day, was watching her mother ironing. She patiently watched the progress of the iron until it came to the handkerchiefs. Then she took the plunge. "Mother, dear," she remarked, "may I learn to dance?"'

Schilling's mother was initially unwilling to let her daughter take classes, and demanded to know why her daughter had an interest in an activity that in some households was not considered appropriate for young ladies. But she eventually relented, and Schilling went to learn dancing from renowned Melbourne teacher Jennie Brenan, whose school had opened in 1904, probably just shortly before Schilling arrived to take her first classes. Brenan and her two sisters taught ballet, ballroom and fancy dancing and the studio supplied dancers to J.C. Williamson musicals. Brenan herself was also well known as an arranger of dances for Williamson musicals, pantomimes and operettas, and continued to teach well into the twentieth century.

When Schilling began her dancing lessons, she already had, unbeknown to her mother, set her eyes firmly on a stage career. She joined the pantomime class at Brenan's school rather than the ballroom dancing class. And when the pantomime season in Melbourne opened in the year that Schilling turned 12, she faced her mother again and announced that she was about to make her stage debut in *Mother Goose*.

After *Mother Goose*, Schilling's career path was clear, and work as a dancer never seemed to elude her. After more work in pantomime she went on to dance professionally in a series of J.C. Williamson musicals including *Our Miss Gibbs* in 1910 and *The Quaker Girl* in 1911. She established

an acclaimed partnership with another Australian dancer and choreographer, Fred Leslie, and together they danced many specialty numbers across the country. Often these specialty items were interpolated into musicals. For example, 'Ju-No Kata', the duet they danced based on ju-jitsu moves, was introduced into *Florodora*, and later *The Quaker Girl*. Schilling also appeared in 1913 in what is regarded as the first J.C. Williamson revue, *Come Over Here*, in which she and Leslie performed their famous 'Spider and the Fly' routine. This number was an inspiration to a young Robert Helpmann, who saw the pair perform it in Adelaide. Helpmann recalls the occasion in an oral history interview recorded for the National Library in 1974: 'The first night after we arrived [from Mount Gambier] I was taken to the theatre: this to me was magic. It was the first time I'd ever been in a live theatre. It was a revue called *Come Over Here*, in which Fred Leslie and Ivy Schilling did a dance called "The Spider and the Fly".'

So while Anna Pavlova may have been Helpmann's great inspiration to make a career as a dancer, as a man of the theatre his fate was sealed the night he watched Leslie and Schilling in 'The Spider and the Fly'.

But as the Schilling papers reveal, this 'Bernhardt of dancing' was a real celebrity for many reasons that extended beyond her dancing skills. Her physique and her athletic prowess were often noted in the press. As one paper reported: 'She belongs to the athletic cult, and practices assiduously with the heavy dumbbells and the parallel bars, and all the other appurtenances of the gymnasium.' Schilling included punch ball, boxing, wrestling and ju-jitsu in her daily training routine. She had strong and controversial opinions about the kind of sport that women might play, saying that she couldn't see why women shouldn't play football. She won a beauty competition, Sirens of the Surf, in Sydney, and another in Christchurch, New Zealand, while on tour there with a J.C. Williamson pantomime. She modelled for Rexona products and was described as 'a perfect model of a fine girlish beauty'. Her 'vital statistics' were discussed freely in the press. Little escaped notice.

But perhaps her most widely reported exploit outside the theatre occurred in 1911, when she saved a well-known surfer, Tommy Walker, from drowning at Manly Beach.



Apparently seized by stomach cramps, Walker had been carried out into dangerous waters and had begun to sink when Schilling, a strong swimmer, swam out to rescue him. One newspaper was moved to publish a piece of doggerel to celebrate the event:

They saw him bob where  
breakers lob  
His lungs with fluid filling;  
But when he gave another bob  
Up came a shiny Schilling.

Her name continued to generate word games, and a postcard from an admirer contains more verse, this time headed 'Ode to IV 1/-!'. But by the time she arrived in London in 1914 to pursue her career there (as was the custom for Australian theatre artists at the time), the outbreak of World War I was not far off. Schilling, whose surname began with





above:  
Ivy Schilling, 1921  
Photograph by Bertram Park,  
London  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 6410/1

middle:  
Ivy Schilling in *Aladdin*  
pantomime, 1915  
Photograph by Foulsham  
& Banfield Ltd  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 6410/1

right:  
Ivy Schilling in *Aladdin*  
pantomime, 1915  
Photograph by Foulsham &  
Banfield Ltd  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 6410/1



a Germanic cluster of consonants, removed the 'c' and became Ivy Schilling.

Under this name she performed in London and other large cities in England, in pantomime, musical comedy and revue—in works such as *Chu Chin Chow*, *Maggie*, *Aladdin*, *Watch Your Step*, and *The Lilac Domino*—and, accompanied again by Leslie, appeared as a specialty dancer in vaudeville.

On the strength of her performances at Drury Lane in *The Lilac Domino*, Schilling returned to Australia under contract to Tivoli Theatres Ltd to appear in the Sydney run of that show in 1921. Her contract is preserved at the Library in the papers of J.C. Williamson, at MS 9145. It indicates that she was provided with a return, first-class sea passage from London, and received a salary of £100 per week, a not insubstantial amount given that the basic wage in the 1920s was in the vicinity of £5.

Schilling's visit home seems to have resulted in the development of another side to her performing career. She appeared in the 1921 black and white feature film, *The Blue Mountains Mystery*, directed by Raymond Longford and Lottie Lyell. Nothing in Schilling's papers, however, documents this appearance—and the film itself, whose libretto was based on the book *The Mount Marunga Mystery* by Harrison Owen, is presumed lost. But Schilling does appear to

have pursued her interest in working in film when she returned to London after the Australian season of *The Lilac Domino*. From London, according to an undated clipping in her scrapbook, she sailed on the *Mauretania* to 'participate in film work in Los Angeles.' Little else has so far come to light about Schilling's excursion into film. Further research is clearly warranted.

In 1931, *The Times* (London) announced Schilling's engagement to Harley Street surgeon John Eugene Ryan. They were married in London on 18 March 1932. Can we assume that marriage was the end of the career of Ivy Schilling, and that she spent the rest of her life until her death in 1972 happily married as Mrs John Ryan? Again, only further research will tell. Her small collection of papers certainly provides an insight into an unusual woman who was a household name for two decades. The material suggests that there is much more to discover about her dancing career, as well as about her status in many other areas of public life in the first decades of the twentieth century.

MICHELLE POTTER is the National Library's Curator of Dance. She was the recipient of the award for services to dance at the 2003 Australian Dance Awards.