



“Madame Ballet”

Michelle Potter reveals how Russian dancer Kira Bousloff boldly created an environment for dance to flourish in Western Australia

When I came to the airport here in little Perth, at the end of the world, I put my feet on the ground, I looked around, and I said loudly and strongly ‘That’s where I’m going to live and that’s where I’m going to die.’

—Kira Bousloff

Kira Bousloff, or Kira Abricossova as she was known during her early performing career, was the founder of the West Australian Ballet, one of Australia’s earliest state-based ballet companies—the first, in fact, to call itself a state company.

Bousloff, whose youth had been lived out of a suitcase as she travelled the world as a dancer with the Ballets Russes companies of Colonel de Basil, decided to remain in Australia in 1939 at the end of a tour by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet. She recalls that decision in an oral history interview recorded for the National Library in 1990:

I was sitting in my hotel room in Melbourne on my own and I had a strong feeling that my father (who had died many years ago) touched my shoulder. It was a physical feeling practically. Then I had suddenly this strong feeling that I had to stay in Australia. So without even thinking twice (of course, you see, I’m a bit queer, eccentric, but that’s the truth, that’s what happened) I ran down the stairs and rang up ... a very good friend and I said, ‘I want to stay in Australia. How [do] I go about [it]?’

Maurice Seymour (1904–1993)
*Portrait of Kira Bousloff (kneeling),
 Lara Obidenna and Valentin
 Zeglovsky in the Ballet Russe
 production of Cimarosiana* c.1936
 b&w negative; 10.0 x 12.0 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an13015651



above left:
Maurice Seymour (1904–1993)
*Kira Abricossova in Symphonie
Fantastique, Ballets Russes*
c.1936
b&w photograph;
25.7 x 20.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11030051-22



above right:
Ashley De Prazer
*Margrete Helgeby and Stefan
Karlsson in a promotional
image for the Loaded dance
project, 27 March 1997*
b&w photograph;
26.5 x 26.7 cm
Pictures Collection
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Bousloff's first few years in Australia with her first husband, Serge, were spent in Melbourne. She worked with newly emerging Australian ballet companies, including the National Theatre Ballet and Ballet Guild, and Serge made ballet shoes and danced with the Borovansky Ballet. But by the early 1950s she had moved to Perth with her second husband, composer James Penberthy, and her two children. Never one to stand still, after seeing talented dancers in the local ballet schools she decided Perth needed its own ballet company. The lack of money, and studio and professional dancers did not stand in her way. In 1952, as a result of a public meeting called by Bousloff and Penberthy, a new company called the West Australian State Ballet emerged. This company gave its first season, backed by entrepreneur Eric Edgley, in Her Majesty's Theatre in 1953. In the program for that season Edgley wrote: 'this season will be the dawn of a new era in [the] Perth theatre world, for it will mark the premiere of what is hoped to be its own State Ballet'.

Of course there was dance in the west before Kira Bousloff, or 'Madame Ballet' as Western Australian author Ffion Murphy

called her. There was a succession of visits from international stars and companies, including Anna Pavlova in the 1920s and American modern dance pioneer, Ted Shawn, in the 1940s. Shawn was even inspired to write a special note in the program for his season of performances and lectures at Perth's Patch Theatre:

Perth, due to its unique isolation, is ideally a place where a new dance form, growing out of this continent, using the forms of other countries and the past as a sort of cultural 'humus' can be born, nourished until its integrity is fully established, and then ray out to the rest of Australia and the world.

There were also two determined and inspired women, Linley Wilson and Alison Lee, who nurtured dance in Western Australia from the 1920s onwards. Wilson established Caravan Ballet, a semi-professional company that gave senior dance students performing experience. Lee gave self-funded solo dance recitals in Perth and also danced as Helena Lineva in Australia with the Original Ballet Russe.

In many respects Bousloff was able to establish a Perth-based ballet company as a result of those who had prepared

the ground for her. For example, both Wilson and Lee were teachers in Perth in the years that preceded Bousloff's arrival, and their well-trained students formed a nucleus of dancers on which Bousloff could draw for her new company. But as a Russian dancer with an impeccable dance heritage, Bousloff had a certain glamour that mesmerised many. She also had strong musical support from Penberthy who, as the West Australian Ballet began to develop, composed many original scores for her choreography, thus bringing to the fore the tradition of the Ballets Russes companies of engaging in collaborative associations across artistic disciplines. And Bousloff had the nous to approach a backer, the theatrically and financially well-connected Eric Edgley, as well as the courage, perhaps even impertinence, to refer to her very young and largely inexperienced company as a state company.

Stories of intuition and fate pepper her interviews: 'I believe in fate,' she said. 'I believe in intuition, and I believe that every one of us is chosen for a certain job.' But even if she did often highlight, a little too ingenuously perhaps, the ease with which she was able to get a ballet company up and running, Kira Bousloff undoubtedly created an environment for dance to flourish in the west. That first season of

1953 probably was 'the dawn of a new era' as Edgley had predicted.

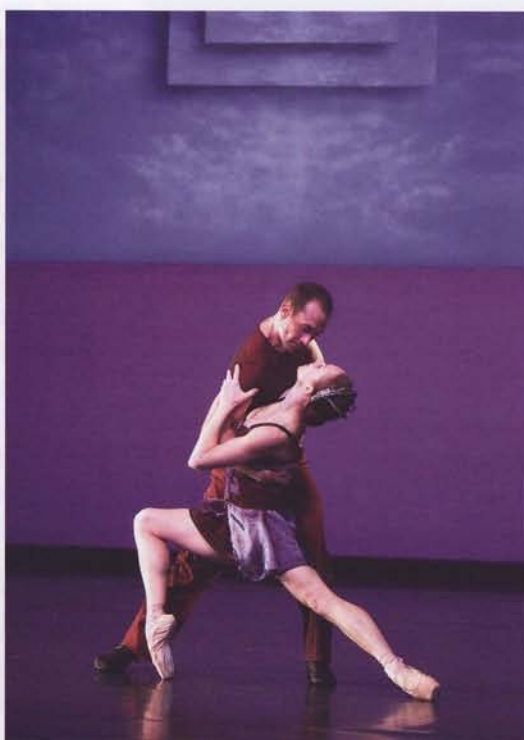
Recent photographic acquisitions by the National Library of works by Perth-based photographers Ashley de Prazer and Jon Green show just how diverse the state's dance culture now is. Although Perth can currently boast two professional companies offering dancers long-term contracts—the West Australian Ballet and Buzz Dance Theatre—much of the dance presently being made in Western Australia, and in most other Australian states, is created by independent artists or by groups of people coming together specifically for individual projects. The work of de Prazer documents, for example, the work of Co.loaded, a project-based company established by Margrete Helgeby and Stefan Karlsson to give opportunities to mature dancers, mostly dancers over the age of 35. The work of Co.loaded has attracted much public interest both for its spirited support of older yet still vibrant performers, and for its daring repertoire.

De Prazer has also photographed many of the state's independent artists, often outside the confines of the proscenium arch theatre. His portrait of Olivia Millard and Paul O'Sullivan, both independent performers, was taken as a promotional image for Millard's work, *Warning*, and was shot in the Swan River in 1997. Millard also

below left:
Ashley De Prazer
Olivia Millard and Paul O'Sullivan in the Swan River for a promotional photograph to advertise Warning by Olivia Millard 9 June 1997
b&w photograph; 35.7 x 23.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3091468

below middle:
Jon Green
Jacinta Ross Ehlers and David Cranson during a technical rehearsal for the Latin Romance season, West Australian Ballet 2003
col. digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3101866

below right:
Jon Green
Emiliana Lione of the West Australian Ballet March 2004
col. digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3101887





above left:
Jon Green
*Louise Chalwell of the West
Australian Ballet 2004*
b&w digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3101869



above right:
Jon Green
*Callum Hastie of the West
Australian Ballet April 2004*
b&w digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3101857

features in the Library's recent acquisition from Jon Green in shots that highlight striking moments in exceptional individual performances, capturing Millard's unique sense of freedom and balance.

Since 1985, when a company called 2 Dance was established to introduce modern dance to school children, youth dance has had a strong profile in Perth. The 21st century manifestation of this company, Buzz Dance Theatre, continues to operate as 2 Dance did, that is as a dance-in-education group. It focuses on bringing accessible dance to children and young people. Sometimes these works are inspired by well known stories or fairytales, such as *Rumplestiltskin* and *Rabbit* (based on *Alice in Wonderland*). But Green has also documented works from Buzz, such as their recent *Beat Routes*, that are less inspired by narrative than by the more abstract elements of dance such as rhythm and time.

The Library's recent acquisitions documenting dance in the west also highlight the continued growth of the West Australian Ballet. Both de Prazer and Green have produced outstanding images of past and present company dancers such as Benazir Hussain, Callum Hastie and

Jacinta Ross Ehlers, who are technically accomplished artists with a strong stage presence and developed dramatic abilities, rather like their predecessor from the Ballets Russes. De Prazer and Green have also produced images of the West Australian Ballet's contemporary repertoire, which reveal the company's ongoing engagement with new choreography and with the enterprise of collaboration. This company, still active over 40 years after Kira Bousloff was bold enough to suggest that the state needed a ballet company, can claim an enviable legacy. Through Bousloff, it stands in a direct line of descent from the Ballets Russes companies that visited Australia between 1936 and 1940. 'Madame Ballet' was one of a number of artists who stayed in Australia following one or other of the Ballets Russes tours and went on to make a contribution to the development of dance in Australia. In the west the diaspora has been a fruitful one.

MICHELLE POTTER is Curator of Dance at the National Library and Adjunct Associate Professor at the Elder Conservatorium, University of Adelaide