

# Terra Australis



## Michelle Potter describes *Terra Australis*, the Borovansky Ballet's all-Australian creation of 1946

Sir Robert Helpmann was fond of suggesting that his ballet *The Display*, made for the Australian Ballet in 1964, was the first all-Australian ballet ever choreographed. In an interview with Hazel de Berg recorded for the National Library at the time of the ballet's first season he spoke proudly of his achievements:

I have tried as much as I can to keep the whole atmosphere of it absolutely and completely Australian. Sidney Nolan, who has done the décor, is an Australian; Malcolm Williamson, who has written the score, is an Australian; the company who are dancing it are

Australians. I am very proud that this should be the first one hundred per cent Australian ballet to have been choreographed.

But the first all-Australian ballet was not *The Display*. Several all-Australian works predate it. They include Laurel Martyn's *The Sentimental Bloke* with an original score by John Tallis and designs by Charles Bush, which was created in 1952 for Martyn's Victorian company, Ballet Guild, and Valrene Tweedie's *Wakooka* with a commissioned score from John Antill and designs by Elaine Haxton, created for the Elizabethan Opera Ballet Company in 1957. The very first all-Australian creation, however, was probably *Terra Australis*, which premiered in Melbourne on 25 May 1946, almost 20 years before the

(left) Eve Harris (1917–1995)  
[Costume design for the Spirit of Australia in *Terra Australis*, Borovansky Ballet, 1946]  
Manuscript Collection, MS9610  
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(right) Eve Harris (1917–1995)  
[Costume design for the explorer in *Terra Australis*, Borovansky Ballet, 1946]  
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Helpmann work. With choreography by the newly naturalised Edouard Borovansky, a commissioned score from Esther Rofe, designs by Eve Harris and a libretto by Tom Rothfield, *Terra Australis* was danced by Australia's first enduring, professional ballet company, the Borovansky Ballet. The main roles were performed by three of the leading dancers of that company—Peggy Sager, Martin Rubinstein, and Vassilie Trunoff. The narrative line concerned the exploration of Australia



Eve Harris (1917–1995)  
 [Costume design for the spirit of Australia  
 in *Terra Australis*, Borovansky Ballet, 1946]  
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out the genesis of the work, and his intentions with regard to the libretto:

[Borovansky] had ideas very definitely then about creating an Australian ballet to be danced by Australians and the music to be written here, the story here and the décor here. We found a community of interest right from the beginning ... We were concerned with writing the true story of Australia and naturally the fate of the Aboriginal [sic] came into it. And if the national conscience is stirred by the ballet, well so much the better.

The Library recently acquired Eve Harris' original designs for *Terra Australis*. The collection comprises newspaper clippings and reviews and a number of designs in gouache on board. The designs include costume sketches for the Spirit of Australia, the Aborigine, the Explorer and the corps de ballet, and a sketch for a proposed backcloth, which only

by white settlers and dealt symbolically with the tensions between Indigenous and European cultures. Australia was represented by a beautiful young woman, the Spirit of Australia (Sager), who was courted by an Aboriginal lover (Trunoff) but attracted to a European settler (Rubinstein). The dramatic consequences of this double liaison were spelt out as the work progressed. In the final moments, the mortally wounded Aborigine was returned to the Earth, danced by the corps de ballet.

In a radio interview now held in the collection of ScreenSound Australia, and recorded just before the opening night of *Terra Australis*, Rothfield set



Eve Harris (1917–1995)  
 [Newspaper clippings  
 for *Terra Australis*,  
 1946]  
 Manuscript Collection,  
 MS9610



Jean Stewart (b.1921)  
*'Terra Australis'; Borovansky Ballet, 1946*  
 b&w photograph; 20.3 x 25.7 cm  
 In: Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet  
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an11030051-2

Australia's dress had, instead of the blue drapery, a trail of flowers spilling down the front. 'My dress was green with purple flowers'—Sager recalled in an oral history interview recorded for the Library in 1994.

Of the costume for the Spirit of Australia, *The Age* commented in its review of the opening night performance, 'Her pale green tunic, spattered with flowers, was the one really trite note in the entire ballet'. It is interesting to note, in light of this and other press comments, that Harris' two other, unused designs for the Spirit of Australia were strongly developed and had a distinctly Australian quality to them. One, for a blue dress in a traditional balletic style, has a gold trim on the neckline and a matching gold head-dress suggestive of sprigs of wattle. It has tiny southern stars scattered on its bodice. The other, the strongest of the three designs, is, almost prophetically, in the red, black, and yellow-ochre colours of the present day Aboriginal flag. It is strikingly modern in conception and line and would clearly have pleased the dissatisfied reviewer of the Melbourne *Herald* who wrote after the opening night, 'Peggy Sager was a glowing and highly desirable Australia, though her garb suggested rural England rather than the robust Australian bush.'

Harris herself seems to have been a strong, politically aware woman. Born in Hawthorn, Victoria, in 1917 and trained in art at Swinburne Technical College, she worked professionally as a graphic artist in advertising. In an interview in October 2002 her husband, Jim Fullarton, recalled that she was a paid-up member of the Communist Party, fascinated by native flora and its conservation and had an abiding interest in the theatre and in Aboriginal causes. *Terra Australis* was her only work for the Borovansky Ballet but she also worked as a set and costume designer for the Melbourne New Theatre in the 1940s. Plays with strong



Jean Stewart (b.1921)  
*Peggy Sager as the Spirit of Australia,*  
*Martin Rubinstein as the Explorer in*  
*'Terra Australis', choreographed by*  
*Edouard Borovansky, Borovansky Ballet,*  
*Melbourne, 1946*  
 b&w photograph; image 20.0 x 14.5 cm  
 In: Peggy Sager Ballet Photographs  
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23924279

marginally resembles Harris' final version of the backcloth. Perhaps the

most interesting items in this collection are three costume designs for the Spirit of Australia. None of Harris' designs was used exactly as designed. The closest to what eventually went into production is a design for a pale green dress decorated with a swathe of blue drapery. Production photographs for *Terra Australis*, however, show that



*Peggy Sager as the Spirit of Australia, Martin Rubinstein as the Explorer and Vassilie Trunoff as the Aboriginal in 'Terra Australis', choreographed by Edouard Borovansky, Borovansky Ballet, Melbourne, 1946*

b&w photograph; image 15.0 x 20.1 cm  
In: Peggy Sager Ballet Photographs  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23924450

Australian content on which she worked included *The Drovers* by Louis Esson, *Henry Lawson* by Oriel Gray and *Sons of the Morning*, a work about Australian soldiers in Crete by Catherine Duncan, all staged in 1944. She also designed a set for a revue called *Coming Our Way?*, which included a ballet, *White Justice*, performed by eight dancers from the Aboriginal Advancement League, with which Harris was closely involved.

For audiences in 2003 *Terra Australis* is, of course, not without its problems, mostly associated with the somewhat strained symbolism of the narrative and with the difficulties of resolving that narrative with current attitudes to and awareness of Indigenous history and culture. But the work was a critical success in

1946. It was praised for the power of its choreography and for the strength of the performances by the dancers. It was also lauded for the fact that it addressed colonial history in a way that was at the time deemed thoughtful. It was restaged in 1947 when a new backcloth was designed by William Constable, and when Kathleen Gorham took on Peggy Sager's original role as the Spirit of Australia. This restaging was filmed in 1947 by the then Commonwealth Film Unit and excerpts from that archival footage appear in the joint video production from the National Library and ScreenSound Australia, *Boro's Ballet: The Making of an Australian Ballet, 1939–1961*.

*Terra Australis* was also a remarkable work in terms of its production. Borovansky divided the stage into two sections with a raised platform occupying about half the stage and running lengthwise across it. On this upper level the protagonists played out their tragic story. On the lower level, the foreground space, the corps de ballet wove organic movement patterns and posed in monumental groupings. In the denouement the corps de

ballet received the body of the Aborigine into their arms. Now it is not uncommon for Australian choreographers to seek out new ways to use space—and Meryl Tankard's experiments with ropes and harnesses that allow her dancers to fly through space come immediately to mind. But *Terra Australis* was probably the first Australian dance work to conceive of and use the space of the stage as a choreographic and dramatic device.

The Library's newly acquired Eve Harris designs provide insights into a work previously only known from black and white production photographs and snatches of black and white footage. The designs also raise questions about the relationship between design and production and even, perhaps, about the role of women in the production process. But, as much as anything, they add to our knowledge about what was most likely the first all-Australian dance work, *Terra Australis*.

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