

# THE ARMIDALE SUMMER SCHOOLS

Michelle Potter tells how the University of New England's summer schools of the 1960s and 1970s helped shape the direction of Australian dance

The University of New England is widely acknowledged as having made a significant, pioneering contribution to dance education in Australia. This has been achieved by a series of residential activities held as part of the University's Summer Schools programmes in the arts—a salient feature of the adult education activities conducted by its Department of Continuing Education.

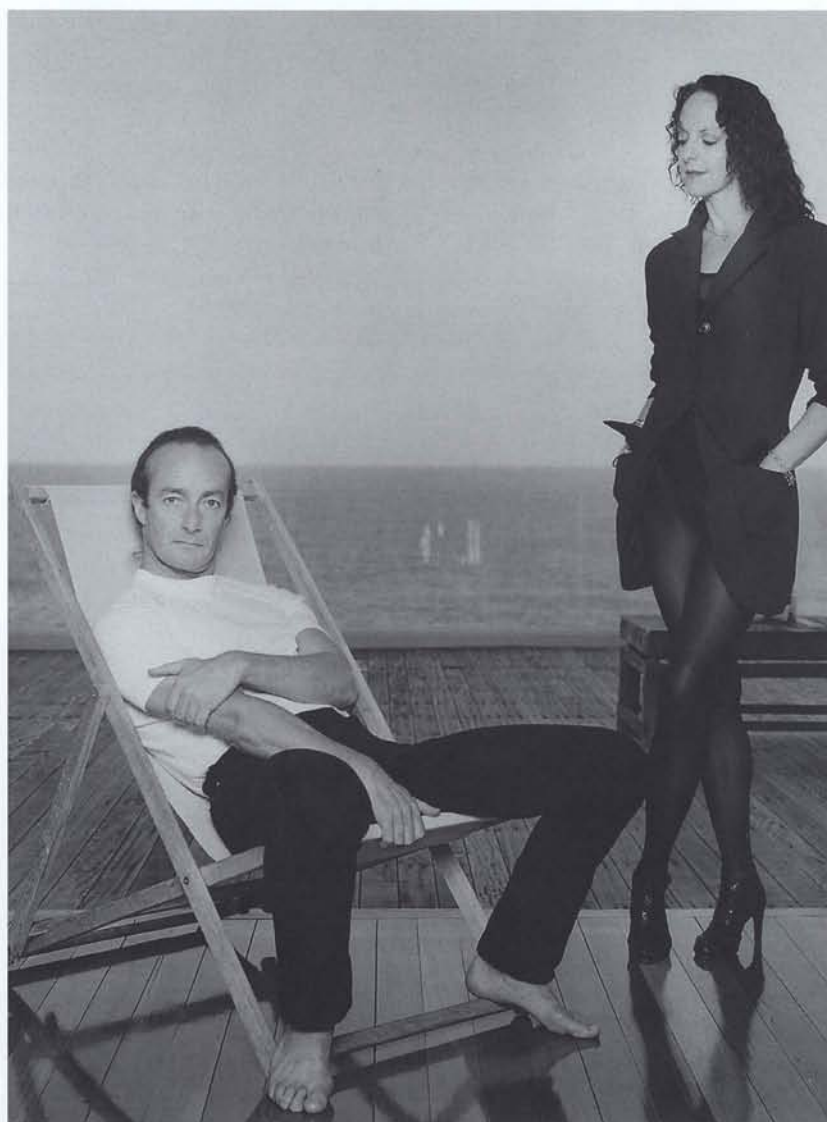
This rather formal statement appeared in an article entitled 'Ballet at the University of New England 1966–1976' in the *Journal and Proceedings of the Armidale and District Historical Society* in January 1977. Written by Bernard James, director of the continuing education program at the University of New England (UNE) at the time, the article outlines the history of four momentous summer

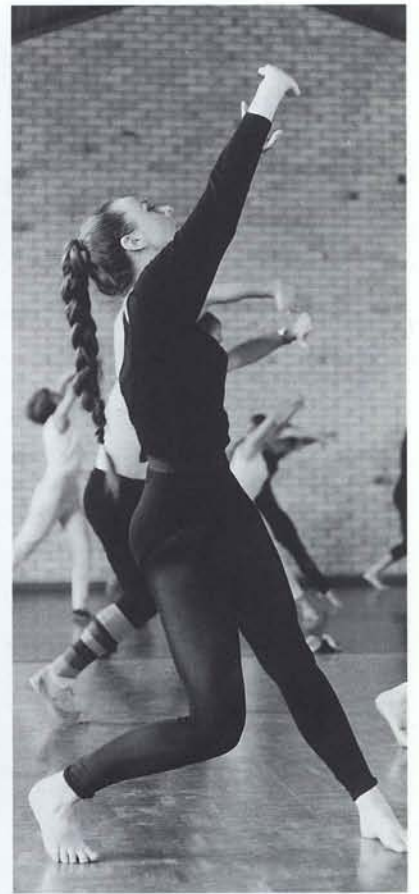
schools organised by UNE and held on its Armidale campus in 1967, 1969, 1974 and 1976. James's clearly written and important account captures little, however, of the excitement generated by the Armidale summer schools, where creativity was fostered, where some of Australia's most prominent artists made contributions, and where the talents of aspiring choreographers, dancers, writers and historians—some, such as Graeme Murphy, now with an international reputation—were nurtured.

A little of the history of the Armidale summer schools is documented in two collections of personal papers held by the National Library of Australia—the papers of Peggy van Praagh (MS 7223) and Shirley McKechnie (MS 9553). Both van Praagh and McKechnie played seminal roles in the development of

Branco Gaica  
*Portrait of Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon* [1995]  
gelatin silver photograph; image  
16.5 x 19.4 cm. on sheet  
25.2 x 20.2 cm  
Courtesy Sydney Dance Company

the summer schools. Van Praagh was, at the time of the inaugural school, co-artistic director with Robert Helpmann of the Australian Ballet. She was the artistic force behind that first school and much of the subsequent development of the summer programs. McKechnie, a dance educator who would go on to play an instrumental role in the establishment of dance as a subject of tertiary study in Australia and who is now a professorial fellow at the Victorian College of the Arts, took a major role in the two schools of the 1970s.





(left, above & below right)  
 Shirley McKechnie (b.1926)  
 Armidale Summer School dance classes  
 Shirley McKechnie Papers  
 Manuscript Collection MS 9553

(above right)  
 Dame Peggy van Praagh (1910–1990)  
 Peggy van Praagh teaching at the  
 Australian Ballet in Melbourne c.1962  
 Manuscript Collection MS 7223/1

The summer schools of the 1960s were conceptually quite different from those of the 1970s. The first school, held in 1967, was strongly oriented towards classical ballet. Its press release stated its aim was 'to give to those who attend it insights into ballet as an art form and, by so doing, to create an informed public for ballet in Australia'. The second, presented under the title 'The Development of Dance in the Twentieth Century', looked at seminal figures and movements after 1900 and analysed modern dance as an art form in its own right as well as for the influence it had on classical ballet. The press release for this school stated: 'The aim of the school basically is to broaden people's knowledge of dance in the 20th Century and to introduce modern dance in its varied

manifestations'. In both schools of the 1960s there was a strong emphasis on audience development, on giving status and credibility to dance within the wider community, and on international movements in the dance world.

Both the summers schools of the 1960s also largely followed a lecture/discussion format with leading roles on both occasions being taken by van Praagh. In 1967 she lectured on topics such as the history of ballet, the great dance schools of the world, the training of the dancer and the art of the choreographer, and in 1969 on classical ballet of the Diaghilev era, the influence of Diaghilev, interactions between classical and modern dance, and postwar classical ballet. Nevertheless, while the format for the schools of the 1960s was very

much an academic one, with a small number of dancers being made available to demonstrate the points made by lecturers, already the mix of disciplines that was to be a feature of the schools of the 1970s was in place. While van Praagh was clearly a leading light in the proceedings, lecturers at the 1967 school included Eric Thacker from the Department of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne and Eric Westbrook, director of the National Gallery of Victoria. Participants at the 1969 school heard lectures from musicologist Wendy Pomroy on contemporary music in classical ballet and modern dance and visual artist George Baldessin on modern painting, in particular German expressionism.

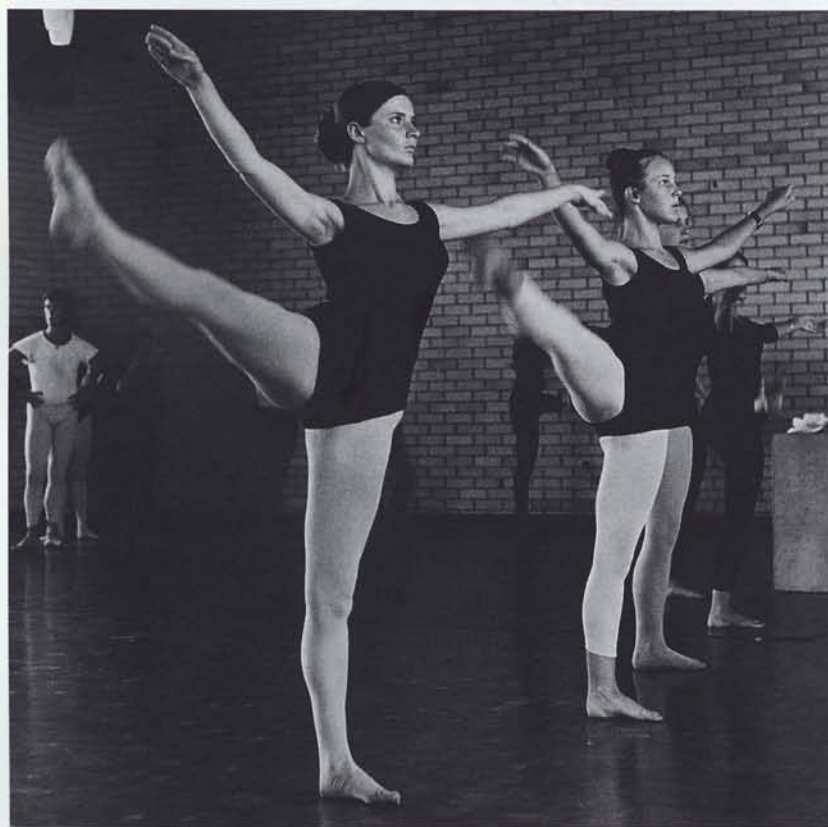
With the first 1970s summer school, however, the focus changed



quite dramatically. In 1974 the school was billed as a choreographic workshop/dance school. Participation in the workshop was by invitation and the 12 invited choreographers included several still working in the field today including Ian Spink now working in the United Kingdom, John Meehan currently working in New York and directing American Ballet Theatre's second company, and Jacqui Carroll and Norman Hall still actively choreographing in Australia. The focus was on exploration and experiment and the interchange of ideas between tutors and choreographers. Classes in various dance techniques were given in the morning and participants in the dance school were available for choreographers to work with in afternoon workshop sessions. The emphasis had become practical and creative rather than academic and audience-oriented and links were established with tutors, including visual artists John Olsen and Andrew Sibley and poet Tom Shapcott, in summer schools being held on other parts of the UNE campus.

By 1976 the 1960s stream had merged with the processes of 1974 and the fourth summer school consisted of a choreographic workshop with tutors from Australia, London and New York and, running parallel but with considerable crossover, a seminar/lecture series on the history of dance, dance aesthetics and dance criticism led by Peter Brinson, British dance activist, critic and intellectual, and founder of the Royal Ballet's dance in education program, Ballet for All. Among the choreographers participating in the workshop in 1976 was a 25-year-old Graeme Murphy then freelancing and still to take on the directorship of Sydney Dance Company. His muse and partner Janet Vernon, of whom Murphy still says 'she is always there for me', was also a participant—one of 30 dancers who worked with the choreographers.

Murphy's choreographic talent was already obvious as was the strength of the inspiration he derived from Vernon's dancing, which was clear in a luminous solo he created for her at the summer school. At least one





videotape remains from the 1976 school. Recorded on obsolete equipment it was transferred to a currently accessible format by ScreenSound as part of the Keep Dancing! project in 1999 and shows Peter Brinson's production for those taking his course of *Your Problems Answered*. A ballet commentary in the style of *Ballet for All*. A brief history of ballet, spoken by two narrators with movements and poses demonstrated by course members to authentic music of the period, its highlight was the conclusion—a short piece choreographed by Murphy on those (of diverse talents and shapes) who were taking Brinson's seminar course.

None of the material in the van Praagh and McKechnie papers provides a complete indication of how the summer schools, especially the early ones, were funded although the schools of the seventies both received substantial support from the Australia Council and from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, with which Peter Brinson was closely connected as director of its United Kingdom and British Commonwealth branch. Support for the 1976 school also came from the Myer Foundation, the Australian–American Educational Foundation and the British Council. At the end of the first summer school, Bernard James wrote to Dr D.H. Coombs at the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust reporting that the school was

'an outstanding success' and expressing the pleasure that UNE felt in having instigated the venture. But by 1976, in a detailed report and acquittal to the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, James reported that the fourth seminar/workshop ended with a deficit and that the University could not in the future commit itself to the planning, organisation and running of such an event without an unconditional guarantee from a funding body to cover any loss. There was never another Armidale summer school after 1976 and it was perhaps not until the Green Mill Dance Project, whose records are also held by the National Library at MS 9370, held its first conference in 1993 that so many dance people came together in the kind of creative environment that was characteristic of the Armidale schools.

Participants at the Armidale schools were sent a variety of information prior to their arrival in Armidale—maps, schedules, lists of tutors and participants, reading lists and so on. In 1967 that information included a description of UNE as 'the only university in Australia with such a rural setting ... red deer, kangaroos and wallabies roam in a small deer park below Booloominbah the administrative centre of the University'. The summer school schedules were always so full, it is hard to imagine that participants would have had time to enjoy the



Unknown photographer  
Peggy van Praagh with Peter Brinson 1975  
Dame Peggy van Praagh Collection,  
Pictorial Collection PIC /3132

(top) Walter Stringer (1907–2001)  
Graeme Murphy, Janet Vernon and  
artists of Sydney Dance Company  
in *Third Conversation*, c. 1980  
35 mm colour slide  
Pictorial Collection

rural peace. Yet what is certain, is that from the creative and cross-disciplinary environment of the UNE summer schools there emerged some of Australia's strongest dance talents.

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