

# A DANCER'S DREAM: Hélène Kirsova and the Development of Australian Dance



Hélène Kirsova made a great contribution to the development of dance in Australia. But, says Michelle Potter, her life has remained slightly mysterious

**H**élène Kirsova is reputed to have run away to Paris from her native Copenhagen when she was 16. She went, against her parents' wishes, to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. But once in Paris, so the story goes, she had to cut off her hair and sell it in order to survive. Kirsova's survival—and survive she did—had an impact on the development of dance in Australia, for Kirsova, who toured here as a leading dancer with the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet in 1936–37, eventually settled in Sydney for an extended period. In 1938, she married the Danish Vice-Consul to Australia. It was a society wedding and the couple made their

home at Clifton Gardens on the northern shores of Sydney Harbour. Soon after the wedding, Kirsova set up a ballet school, the Hélène Kirsova School of Russian Ballet Tradition, and by 1941 she had established Australia's first professional ballet company, the Kirsova Ballet.

Kirsova was not the only dancer from the touring Russian companies to make a home in Australia. A number of others stayed on, especially after the 1938–39 tour by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet when many found themselves unable or unwilling to return to their war-threatened European homelands. Among those who stayed in 1939 was the Czech-born Edouard Borovansky, whose Borovansky Ballet provided Australians with their main exposure to ballet for over two decades. There was also a group of Poles who, led by Raisse Kouznetsova, established the Polish–Australian Ballet in Sydney. Then there was the Monte Carlo-born Russian, Kira Abricossova Bousloff,

Portrait of Hélène Kirsova  
Reproduced from the program for the  
Red Cross Ballet Season, presented by  
Hélène Kirsova, Sydney, 8 July 1941  
PROMPT Collection

who, after working for some time with various dance companies in Melbourne, settled in Perth where she set up a company that eventually became the still-flourishing West Australian Ballet. And there was Tamara Tchinorova, who danced with both the Kirsova and Borovansky Ballets in Australia and who met a handsome young actor called Peter Finch in Sydney one day and married him.

There were others, too. But of those Ballets Russes dancers who stayed on in Australia, it is Kirsova whose life has remained slightly mysterious. None of the dance literature has ever mentioned her date of birth, and it was only in 1999 during the making of the video *An Avalanche of Dancing*, a joint production by ScreenSound Australia and the National Library, that it was



Max Dupain (1911–1992)  
*Portrait of Hélène Kirsova in Petrouchka*  
 1936–37  
 gelatin silver on fibre-based paper;  
 37.4 x 48.8 cm  
 Pictorial Collection (P46)

discovered. Material held in the National Archives of Australia relating to the arrival of the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet in Adelaide in 1936 revealed that Kirsova was born in 1910 and that her full name was Ellen Elisabeth Kirsten Wittrup-Hansen.

Along with the myth and mystery that has shrouded details of her early life, her achievements in Australia have often been overlooked, or at least eclipsed by the attention given to her contemporary, the flamboyant Borovansky. The period of time Kirsova spent in Australia was short compared with Borovansky, who remained here until his death in 1959, and with Bousloff, who, at the age of 86, still lives and teaches in Perth. Kirsova stayed until 1947 when she left with her second husband, the art critic and editor Peter Bellew, to live once more in

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Paris. Yet, as material held in a number of the National Library's specialist collections indicates, Kirsova's contribution to dance and the related arts in Australia—as a dancer, teacher and artistic director—was significant.

As a dancer, Kirsova was photographed by Max Dupain for his well-known Ballets Russes series. She sat for him for a portrait study, in a pensive mood that is almost at odds with the words Australian critics used to describe her dancing. Kirsova's performances inspired adjectives such as 'bewitching', 'sparkling' and 'dazzling', and she was praised in particular for her 'grace and



Program for the Kirsova Ballet's Melbourne season at His Majesty's Theatre, January 1942, presented by J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd  
 PROMPT Collection



(above) Alice Danciger's costume design for the role of Rosita, danced by Rachel Cameron, in *Capriccio*  
Reproduced from *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, edited by Peter Bellew (Sydney: Craftsman Bookshop, 1946, 2nd edition)

(right) Kirsova Ballet dancers, Peggy Sager, Strelsa Heckelman and Rachel Cameron, posing for a publicity photo on the rocks below Kirsova's home at Taylors Bay, Sydney, 1943  
photograph  
From an album of Peggy Sager ballet photographs, 1938–1961  
Pictorial Collection (P979/3, Album 887)



charm' and her 'rare imaginative powers'. Dupain also photographed her in one of her best-known roles, that of the Ballerina in *Petrouchka*, a role that did indeed call on her imaginative skills and her technical prowess. Recently discovered footage of Kirsova dancing in this ballet—footage now housed at ScreenSound Australia—brings to life the Dupain photograph and shows a pert and enticing dancer with strong technical capabilities.

Kirsova was keen to pass on her technical strengths as a dancer to the students who came to study at her school at Circular Quay. Her teaching style is remembered by some of her former students in interviews in the Library's Oral History Collection. Peggy Sager, who danced in the film *The Red Shoes* and became one of Australia's best-known ballerinas with the Borovansky Ballet, came from New Zealand as a young student especially to study at Kirsova's school. In a 1994

interview, Sager recalls Kirsova's classes with a mixture of pleasure and awe at the technical challenges that were put before them all:

She gave tremendous classes. Her classes were a short barre, then adage, pirouettes, allegro work, beats—a tremendous amount of beaten work for the girls, not only for the boys—and then grand allegro. In all the allegro you had to do it forward and then, without a break, reverse it. You had to be able to do fouettés—left, right, doubles. Triples if you could manage. A tremendous amount of her class was on speed, footwork and brain.

Sager made her professional debut with the Kirsova Ballet and her own collection of photographs, now housed in the Library's Pictorial Collection, shows her in the variety of roles that she

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danced with the Kirsova Ballet.

But Kirsova was not just a bewitching dancer and determined teacher. She was also an ambitious woman. As the Library's PROMPT Collection of theatre programs and ephemera indicates, her aims for her Kirsova Ballet, which gave its inaugural performance in 1941, were major and



Raisse Kouznetsova in the ballet *Faust*  
 Reproduced from the program for the  
 Kirsova Ballet's season, presented by  
 Hélène Kirsova and Whitehall  
 Productions, Minerva Theatre, Sydney,  
 1941–42  
 PROMPT Collection

long-term. It is clear, even from program notes for that first season, that she wanted to create a permanent Australian ballet. In part those notes read:

It seems anomalous that Australia, which, through the visits of Adelina Genee, Pavlova, Spessiva, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and Colonel de Basil's two most recent companies, has proved itself to be the most truly ballet-conscious country in the world today, has never had its own permanent company.

After that first season, the Kirsova Ballet had further seasons in Sydney and over the next few years also toured to Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane. The company's repertoire was drawn partly from the works Kirsova knew well from her own performing career, works like *Les Sylphides* that could be counted on to attract an audience, but it also included several new ballets choreographed by Kirsova especially for her own company. These new works were not Australian in thematic content, but they clearly reveal what is

Kirsova's most significant contribution to the development of ballet and the related arts in Australia—she was a major patron of Australian designers for dance. In fact, she was the first artistic director in Australia to commission a large corpus of work from Australian-based designers. The program collection records the names of theatre designers like Loudon Sainthill, Amie Kingston, Alice Danciger and Wolfgang Cardamatis, then all Sydney-based, who designed Kirsova's newly-created ballets. Kirsova's studio was, in fact, a mecca for artists and composers. Sager, in her oral history, recalls:

People came. All the artists came and sat and drew during class and rehearsals ... All the artistic people were welcome at all times.

Sager's recollections are shared by another dancer from Kirsova's company, Paul Hammond, who remembers:

She encouraged this whole artistic milieu ... her ballet company was tied into the contemporary arts scene and even the contemporary musical scene. There seemed for once, I think, a great cross relationship between all the arts.

Yet the Kirsova Ballet did not survive past 1944, and Kirsova's school did not last much longer. This determined

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woman, who had devoted most of the profits from her seasons to charity, especially charities that supported children, did not realise her ambitions to the extent that she would obviously have liked. The reasons why this happened, when Kirsova's plans were obviously momentous, are not entirely clear—although Tamara Tchinarova, Kirsova's colleague from the days of the

Ballets Russes tours, provides a partial clue. In an oral history interview recorded for the Library in 1994, Tchinarova reflects that Kirsova was not one to make compromises.

'She had differences of opinion with those who managed the theatres in which she performed,' remarks Tchinarova.

On the other hand, Edouard Borovansky, who started his company around the same time as Kirsova, seemed quite happy to make compromises. Geoffrey Ingram's papers in the Manuscript Collection include letters between Borovansky and the J.C. Williamson organisation, from whom Borovansky leased the theatres in which his company performed. The letters indicate that Borovansky could be quite obsequious if it seemed necessary to him for his survival.

Kirsova died in London in 1962. Many aspects of her life still remain a mystery and her achievements as artistic director of the Kirsova Ballet will probably never be given the same attention as those of Borovansky. But the material relating to her life and career in the diverse collecting areas of the National Library gives a fascinating insight into a woman who, no doubt, gave Borovansky reason to work hard to maintain his position.

The National Library's PROMPT material on the Kirsova Ballet has recently been summarised in an online finding aid ([www.nla.gov.au/collect/prompt/kirsova.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/collect/prompt/kirsova.html)). This finding aid includes listings of the Kirsova Ballet's repertoire, company members and seasons from 1941–44. Oral history interviews that refer to Kirsova and her company include those with Paul Hammond (TRC 2394), Peggy Sager (TRC 3157) and Tamara Tchinarova (TRC 3120). Substantial archival material relating to the Australian career of Hélène Kirsova is also held by the National Gallery of Australia.

MICHELLE POTTER manages the Keep Dancing! project, an Australia Council funded partnership between ScreenSound Australia, the National Library of Australia and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance). She is the author of the National Library of Australia publication *A Passion for Dance*