

Biography: Dr Michelle Potter, AM

Michelle Potter was born in Sydney and learnt to dance with Joan and Monica Halliday, Ronne Arnold and Valrene Tweedie. She also studied acting and theatre techniques at the Mina Shelley School of the Theatre. She began her professional career in 1959 performing in *Aladdin*, a Christmas pantomime directed by Maurice Sullivan and Mina Shelley, and continued to work in the Sullivan-Shelley shows for the next few years. In the mid-1960s she worked with Valrene Tweedie's choreographic ensemble, Ballet Australia, performing in both full-scale productions and in choreographic workshop performances.

In the 1970s and 1980s, after completing a degree in social anthropology and a diploma in education from Sydney University, she taught for Janet Karin and Bryan Lawrence at the National Capital Ballet School in Canberra. During this period, she choreographed *Court Serenade* for National Capital Dancers (1975), *Orpheus and Eurydice* for Canberra Opera (1977), and *Morning Prayer* for St James Church, Curtin ACT (1978), and appeared in productions by the National Capital Dancers, including *Nutcracker* and *Giselle*. In the 1980s she also returned to academic study and completed a second undergraduate degree in art history and subsequently a doctorate in art history and dance history at the Australian National University. She was the National Library of Australia's Esso Fellow in the Performing Arts between 1988 and 1990 and Australian National University's Janet Wilkie Memorial Scholar for 1989, which gave her study time in New York.

In 1996 she curated the National Library of Australia's exhibition *Dance people dance*, which toured Australia under a Visions of Australia grant until 1999. Between 1997 and 2001 Potter was manager of the Keep Dancing! project at the National Film and Sound Archive. As part of that project, she co-scripted, researched and produced three video documentaries: *An avalanche of dancing: the Ballets Russes in Australia 1936-1940* (1999), the award-winning *Boro's ballet: the making of an Australian ballet 1939-1961* (2001) and *The Australian Ballet: opening act 1962-1972* (DVD 2002).

In 2002, Potter was appointed inaugural curator of dance at the National Library of Australia. For the National Library she has recorded over 150 oral history interviews with eminent Australians working in the arts. She has also recorded oral history interviews for the National Library's Australia-China Council Project, and its Chinese Heritage project as well as interviews for the National Film and Sound Archive's Heath Ledger Project and for the National Dance Archive of New Zealand. She was also one of the original team of investigators for the research project 'Ballets Russes in Australia: Our Cultural Revolution', a four-year collaborative partnership between the Australian Ballet, the University of Adelaide and the National Library of Australia, which began in 2005. During this collaborative venture she was accorded the position of Adjunct Associate Professor, Elder Conservatorium of Music, the University of Adelaide.

In 2006, Potter left the National Library to take up an appointment as curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, a position she held until 2008. During this appointment, she co-curated *INVENTION: Merce Cunningham and collaborators*, a major retrospective exhibition for the New York Public

Library in June 2007. Since returning to Australia in 2008 she has been working as a freelance writer, curator and historian.

Potter has been writing about dance since 1990. Her articles and reviews number over 1,000 and have been published in a range of journals, magazines, theatre programs and newspapers in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and New Caledonia. They include *The Australian*, *Australian Art Review*, *Australian Book Review*, *Ballet News*, *Brolga*, *The Bulletin*, *Canberra CityNews*, *The Canberra Times*, *Choreography and Dance*, *Current News from the Library for the Performing Arts*, *Dance Australia*, *Dance Chronicle*, *Dance Forum*, *Dance Research*, *DanceTabs* (formerly *ballet.co.uk*), *The Dancing Times*, *Jahresmitteilungen von Tanzplan Deutschland*, *Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists*, *Limelight*, *Muse*, *Museum National*, *The National Library of Australia Magazine*, *National Library of Australia News*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Voices*. Her writing has also been published as chapters in books in Australia, notably books and catalogues relating to the Ballets Russes and published by the National Gallery of Australia in conjunction with their exhibitions, as well as in the United Kingdom and the United States.

She is the sole author of seven books—*A Full House* (1991), *A Passion for Dance* (1997), *A Collector's Book of Australian Dance* (2002), *Meryl Tankard: An Original Voice* (2012), *Dame Maggie Scott: A Life in Dance* (2014), *Kristian Fredrikson. Designer* (2020) and *Glimpses of Graeme Reflections on the work of Graeme Murphy* (2022). A smaller publication *Kira Bousloff. Founder of the West Australian Ballet* was published in 1990 by the University of Melbourne as no. 14 in the series 'Russians in Australia'. Her program articles have been written for the Australian Ballet, Sydney Dance Company, Paris Opera Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Bolshoi Ballet and La Scala Ballet Milan. In 1994 she founded *Brolga: an Australian journal about dance* and continued to edit that journal until mid-2006. She established her website, *Michelle Potter ... on dancing*, in 2009 and continues to publish reviews, articles and news items on that site.

Potter has given public presentations at many conferences and for a range of organisations and institutions across the world including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Library of Australia, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Arts Centre Melbourne, Fairhall House Melbourne, Das Mime Centrum Berlin, German Dance Archives, the Society of Dance History Scholars, Friends of the Australian Ballet, the Royal Academy of Dance and Cecchetti Ballet. She has also facilitated a week-long seminar on choreographic development for high-profile Australian choreographers, designers and composers on behalf of the Australian Ballet, and given special tutoring to Australian Ballet School students taking a choreographic stream as part of their course.

On Australia Day 2023 Potter was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) with the citation *For significant service to the performing arts in a range of roles*. She is also the recipient of two Australian Dance Awards: Outstanding Achievement in Dance on Film (2001), which she shared with Sally Jackson with whom she collaborated on the video documentary *Boro's Ballet*, and Services to Dance (2003). Other awards include the ANU's

Janet Wilkie Memorial Scholarship (1989), an International Dance Day Award (1996), a Canberra Critics' Circle Award (1997), and two Australian Cultural Studies Awards (1998 and 2000). She was also the recipient in 2012 of a Scholars and Artists in Residence award at the National Film and Sound Archive which enabled her to research the film and television work of Kristian Fredrikson in preparation for her book *Kristian Fredrikson. Designer*.

Education

- Fort Street Girls' High School, Sydney (1957–1961)
- BA(Hons), Sydney, 1968 (Social Anthropology)
- DipEd, Sydney, 1969
- BA(Hons), ANU, 1989 (Art History) Thesis: 'The Ballets Russes in Australia: sources for modernism in Australian art'
- PhD, ANU, 1993 (Art History and Dance History) Thesis: 'Collaborations by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns for Merce Cunningham and his dance company'

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