



Dance in letters

~ THE CORRESPONDENCE OF ALGERANOFF ~

Michelle Potter investigates the letters of a celebrated performer

'Rudolph [Valentino] doesn't thrill me anymore,' wrote one adoring fan in 1925. She was a 14-year-old schoolgirl, and the new object of her admiration was the dancer Algeranoff. He was 22 years old, and dancing with the company of Anna Pavlova at the Winter Garden, Bournemouth, during one of Pavlova's many English seasons. 'I saw you in the eighth item, "Gopak" by Seroff,' she wrote. 'I thought you were simply wonderful. I wonder if you would send me a signed photograph of yourself, for which I enclose a shilling in stamps.'

Son of Alice Kendall and Thomas Essex, London-born Algeranoff, whose full name was Harcourt Algernon Leighton Essex, was indeed a striking figure, with his thick dark hair and strong, expressive face. His young fan was perceptive too, for throughout his dancing career Algeranoff made a name for himself in works whose origin—like the Bournemouth *Gopak*—was not English.

Algeranoff had joined the Pavlova company in 1921, aged 18. He partnered Pavlova in some of her best-known pieces—including *Russian Dance*. Throughout the 1920s he toured with Pavlova to North America, Asia, Australia, Europe and South Africa, and when Pavlova's company disbanded after her death in 1931, Algeranoff joined the Ballets Russes and kept travelling. In fact, he

(above left) Algeranoff in *The Bogeyman* Manuscript Collection

(above right) Algeranoff's letter (with enclosed photographs) to his mother from Southland Hotel, Los Angeles, 28 January 1921 Manuscript Collection

spent most of his life travelling the world as a roving dancer.

The National Library acquired the personal papers of Algeranoff—now housed in the Manuscript Collection as MS 2376—from his son, Noel Essex. The collection, which came to the Library in two stages in 1969 and 1971, is diverse, reflecting the many strands of Algeranoff's career. It is also quite large, occupying 28 boxes in total.

Among its most fascinating items are the handwritten letters that



Algeranoff in Japanese dance
(personal repertoire)
Manuscript Collection

when international travel was by ship and train, rather than plane. There are lists of what must have been one-night stands across the United States and Canada—'January: Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane, Victoria B.C., Vancouver, San Francisco, Oakland, Fresno, Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, Tucson'. There are letters that describe early morning starts for train journeys that reached their destination many long hours later. The Australian experience was no exception. From Melbourne in 1929, Algeranoff wrote: 'The journey was rather cold and having to change trains at 6am at Albury is a miserable proceeding.' And there are other letters that record long, exhausting hours of rehearsal that left little time for anything else.

The letters are also sometimes tinged with annoyance and even resentment at the lot of a dancer. Algeranoff's great friend and flat-mate, Aubrey Hitchens, seemed to have some difficulties with Pavlova. Writing from Sydney in May 1929, Algeranoff told his mother:

Aubrey is much better but they treated him disgracefully tonight. It is infuriating. They decided at the last moment—during the interval—to change the program from 'Californian Poppy' to 'Gavotte' ... Madame [Pavlova] danced the 'Gavotte' with Vladimiroff. Aubrey quite understood *but they didn't even [have] the common decency to tell him*, just sent the dresser for the wig. All this etiquette that they talk of. Aubrey is not saying a word but all the same it doesn't encourage me to work for them, only kindles one's indignation. We've had several striking proofs of the way in which they don't play the game during the week. Really it's nauseating. However one keeps a still tongue and uses one's temperamental energy in a better way than quarrelling.

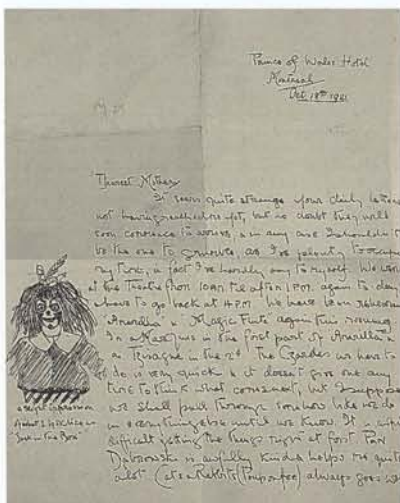
Not everything was difficult, however. Algeranoff enjoyed a fulfilling social life across the world. In Australia he mixed with artists like Adrian Feint

Algeranoff received from his friends and admirers, and those which he wrote himself as he criss-crossed the world. The latter include many letters to his mother back home in London. Some are scribbled hastily in lead ('Please excuse this pencil, my pen has gone wrong'); others are

carefully penned, sometimes in green or blue ink, but mostly in distinctive black. Some are decorated in the margins with sketches—'A slight impression of what I look like as "Jack in the Box"'. They are on all kinds of stationery, including distinctively personal creamy-yellow, or sometimes ochre-yellow, paper; hotel stationery such as that from the 'absolutely fireproof' Southland Hotel in Los Angeles; and ship's stationery such as that from the Canadian Pacific steamship, *Empress of France*.

All the letters begin, 'Dearest Mother'; and all close, 'Believe Me, Your Affec. Son, Algeranoff'. They give an intimate view of life in a touring dance company at a time

Algeranoff's letter to his mother from the Prince of Wales Hotel, Montreal, 18 October 1921
Manuscript Collection



and Roi de Mestre, dined with the Fairfax family of publishers, was good friends with Sydney Ure Smith (publisher of *Art in Australia* and *The Home*) and frequented the studios of well-known photographers—including Monte Luke, who provided him and Hitchins with images of their best-known roles.

In fact, Algeranoff had a wide circle of influential friends, and enjoyed being fêted and taken on excursions out of the main cities, as he reported from Sydney in April 1929:

We have had a lovely day. We have been for a picnic to Kurrajong Heights, about 60 miles [96 km] from here. We should have gone last Sunday but the weather failed us but it was worth having to wait for. We started out about 9.30, some friends of the Cohens called for us and the party assembled about 5 minutes run from here. We had a grand picnic lunch in the mountains and the view was superb. The day passed like minutes.

Algeranoff liked the Australian lifestyle, as he indicates in letters from northern Queensland. Pavlova's company performed in Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton and Bundaberg in 1929 when it was unable to open in Brisbane as expected, due to a delay in the completion of the new His Majesty's Theatre. From Townsville in 1929 he told his mother:

We like this part of Australia. The people are very friendly and nice and the place has some sort of atmosphere. There are really splendid seawater baths here—one cannot bathe outside the enclosures because of sharks, which are many here. Aubrey and I went yesterday and have been twice today and have got quite sunburnt. The little town is quite nice and the surroundings are beautiful, lots of mountains and of course the sea. The theatre is really awfully good for such a little place. The plain food is really quite exotic after the Dutch and Javanese cuisine.

Algeranoff with mother, Alice Essex,
in London c.1937
Manuscript Collection

During the extensive tours he made as a dancer, especially during his Pavlova period, Algeranoff's enquiring mind ensured that he came into contact with dances that represented the countries he visited. At various times he studied Japanese and Indian dancing, and added a range of Asian-inspired works to his personal repertoire—the Japanese *Yakko San*, for example. He also lectured on Asian dancing whenever and wherever he could, and corresponded with dancers in various parts of Asia. This correspondence was often quite technical in nature, but sometimes it was also just friendly chit-chat. For example, from Le Grand Hotel at the French town of Bagnoles-de-l'Orne, his Indian

dancer friend, Leila Sohkey, told him in 1930: 'I have come here for a few days with Maharani of Baroda. It is a marvellous place. Paris was getting on my nerves a bit.'

In Australia, Algeranoff investigated Aboriginal music and legends at a time when an interest in the culture of Indigenous Australians was an uncommon pursuit. Referring to his visit to Australia with Pavlova in 1926, he wrote in his autobiography, *My Years with Pavlova*:

I asked everybody I met about the Aboriginals, for I wanted to see their dancing, but nobody seemed to know anything in Melbourne. The only sympathetic information I received was from a man who had lived in the





the 1960s teaching, mainly at the regional ballet schools he established in southern New South Wales and northern Victoria. (He had well patronised schools at Mildura, Robinvale and Swan Hill.)

Algeranoff was killed in a motor accident in 1967, as he drove between his schools. His personal papers, in particular the extensive correspondence, provide a rich and intimate view of a most unusual man, whose energy, commitment and constant search to learn more about his treasured art form are remarkable.

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(left) Algeranoff with wife, Claudie Léonard (Algeranova)
Manuscript Collection

(below) Ronald Reay, Claudie Algeranova and Algeranoff in Algeranoff's touring production of *Coppelia*, 1960s
Manuscript Collection

country, who presented me with a boomerang and woomera (spear thrower), which had been made by a tribe of Victorian Aborigines who were now extinct.

Algeranoff's ultimate destiny was, in fact, in Australia. After the Pavlova and Ballets Russes tours, he returned briefly on various occasions. He came in 1953, for example, with his wife, the French dancer Claudie Léonard, who had been offered a contract as guest artist with the Borovansky Ballet. By 1959, he had settled here for good. In that year he became ballet master for the Borovansky Ballet, and shortly afterwards took up a contract with the newly-formed Australian Ballet. He spent most of

