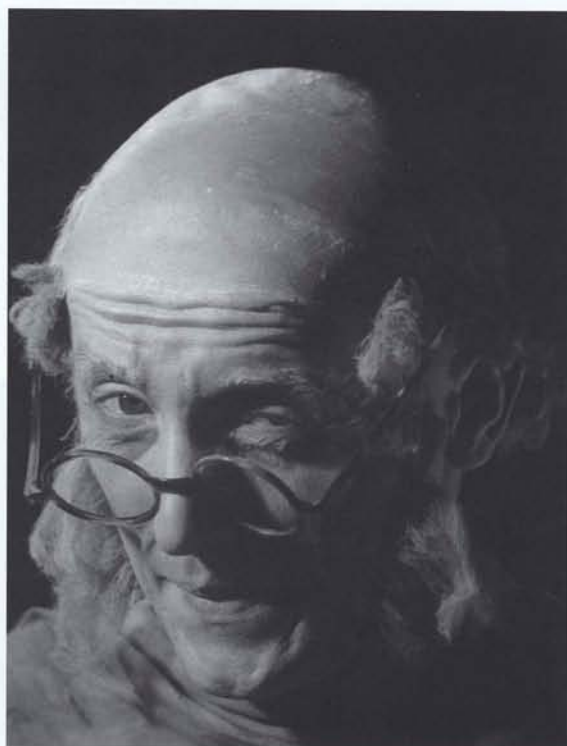


# BORO'S BALLET

## The Making of an Australian Ballet, 1939–1961



*Edouard Borovansky as the Shopkeeper in La Boutique fantasque*  
photograph  
Geoffrey Ingram Archive  
of Australian Ballet  
Pictorial Collection P348/EB/46

Michelle Potter celebrates the life and achievements of

Edouard Borovansky which are documented in a newly released video

[Borovansky] did teach me a little bit about how to cope with the rather aggressive Continental man ... I knew that sometimes if he was a bit rude and inclined to shout a bit that he expected you to shout back, and didn't like it if you didn't.

Eric Clapham, pianist and conductor

Edouard Borovansky, or Boro as he was universally known, was a flamboyant figure. Czech migrant and naturalised Australian, he was reputedly fond of beginning speeches with the proud words, 'We Australians'. As founder of Australia's first major enduring

ballet company, the Borovansky Ballet, his place in Australia's dance history is assured. But Boro was not an easy man to get on with, as Eric Clapham, rehearsal pianist and conductor for Borovansky and his ballet company in the 1940s, suggests. In fact he seems to have been alternately feared and admired by all those who worked with him. Boro was widely regarded as a hard taskmaster but also as a man who unstintingly gave his utmost to create a ballet company for Australia and Australians.

The National Library has significant holdings of material relating to Borovansky and his ballet company. These holdings include substantial pictorial material, such as photographs, paintings and drawings, in both the Geoffrey Ingram Archive

of Australian Ballet and the W.F. Stringer Collection; a number of oral history interviews with former

Borovansky dancers and staff; an almost complete run of programs for two decades of Borovansky seasons and, in the Ingram Collection (MS 7336), unique manuscript items relating to Boro and his wife Xenia. Along with a wealth of film footage located in the collections of ScreenSound Australia, the National Library's Borovansky holdings are at the heart of a newly created video, *Boro's Ballet: The Making of an Australian Ballet, 1939–1961*. This video was released in May as a joint venture between the Library and ScreenSound, two of Australia's premier heritage collecting institutions, and as an initiative of the Keep Dancing! project.

Borovansky first came to Australia in 1929 as a dancer with the company of Anna Pavlova. He returned with



*Edouard Borovansky and his wife Xenia*  
c.1950  
photograph  
Geoffrey Ingram Archive  
of Australian Ballet  
Pictorial Collection P348/EB/21



*Laurel Martyn in Vltava* 1940  
photograph  
Geoffrey Ingram Archive  
of Australian Ballet  
Pictorial Collection P348/BB/5

the Covent Garden Russian Ballet on their tour of 1938–1939, when he not only danced but also was responsible for hiring Australian extras for large-scale productions. At

the end of that tour, Boro and Xenia decided to stay in Australia. Life was not always easy, as Boro suggests in a letter to an old friend in Czechoslovakia:

It was a little strange for my wife and I to stay behind when the Russian Ballet left after being associated with them for so many years, and the beginning of our life here was very hard, as all beginnings are.

But, undaunted, they settled in Melbourne and set up a ballet school in Roma House, Elizabeth Street, not far from the General Post Office.

Boro's first theatrical ventures were not full-scale professional productions but small presentations on a tiny stage built in one of his studios. Through sound and image, *Boro's Ballet* traces some of the early struggles that faced him as he worked to create his dream of founding an Australian ballet company. Remarkable newsreel footage from 1940 shows one of Boro's first stars, Laurel Martyn, dancing the lead in *Vltava* on that tiny studio stage. *Vltava* was one of Boro's most significant creations. As a choreographic rhapsody on the river that runs through Prague, it was a reflection on his Czech heritage. The newsreel footage and the National Library's photographs of *Vltava* from the Geoffrey Ingram Archive are



*Martin Rubinstein in Le Beau Danube,*  
*Borovansky Ballet* c.1946  
photograph  
Photographer: Jean Stewart  
Geoffrey Ingram Archive  
of Australian Ballet  
Pictorial Collection P348/BB/37

historic items, representing not just those very early years of theatrical struggle but Boro's efforts to come to terms in a new situation with his Czech heritage. As for Martyn, she would go on to form her own company a few years after dancing the lead in *Vltava*, but in an interview recorded for the National Library's oral history program she looks back on those early Borovansky years with great fondness. She says:

We were one of the happiest groups of dancers that I think were ever together—I think because we had a very definite purpose in our lives. We wanted to establish an Australian company. We wanted to show that not just the Russians, who of course at that stage were the only other companies that had been for a long time, that not only the Russians could dance, but Australians could dance.

Over the two decades in which he ran the Borovansky Ballet—he died in 1959—Boro nurtured some remarkable dancers. Recently discovered footage, made public for the first time in *Boro's Ballet*, shows many of those dancers in some of their best-known roles, and in some of the Borovansky Ballet's most admired productions. There is the



(left) *Borovansky Ballet in Capriccio Italien* c.1946 photograph Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet Pictorial Collection P348/BB/323

(below left) *Edouard Borovansky (right) with Michael Somes and Margot Fonteyn of the Royal Ballet* 1957 photograph Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet Pictorial Collection P348/EB/22

(below right) *Peggy Sager as the Sugar Plum Fairy in Nutcracker, Borovansky Ballet* 1956 photograph Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet Pictorial Collection P348/BB/62

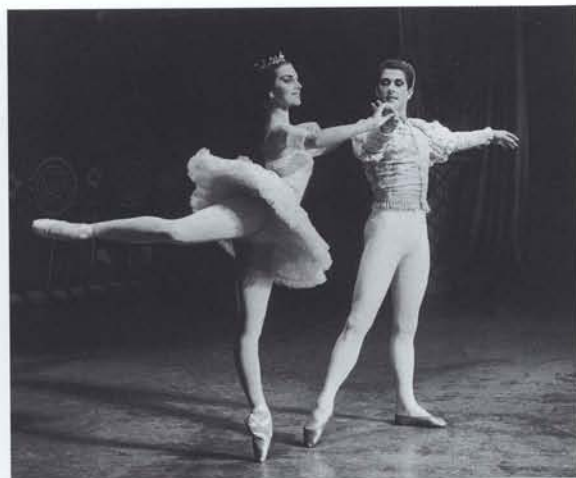
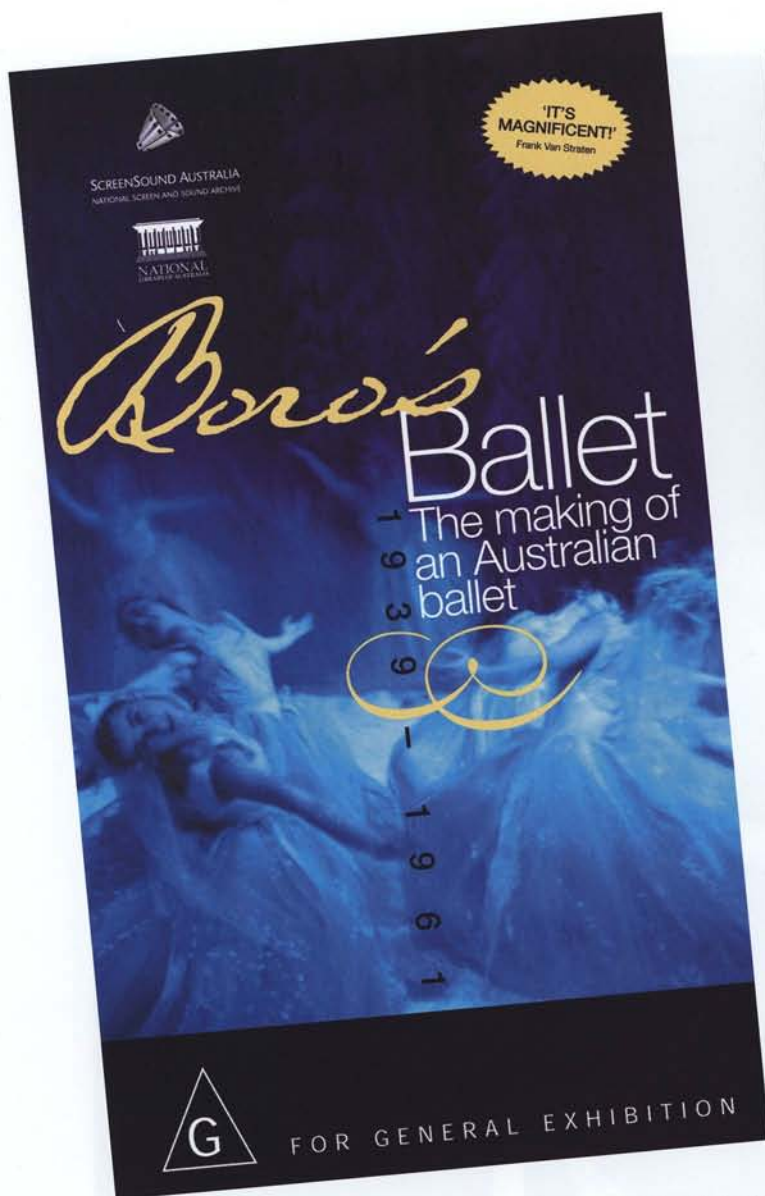


quicksilver Martin Rubinstein in *Capriccio Italien*; a ravishing Kathleen Gorham in *Giselle* and *Los Tres Diablos*, the ballet specially created for her that displayed her captivating stage personality; Peggy Sager, technically outstanding in *Aurora's Wedding*, and enchanting as Columbine in *Le Carnaval*; Marilyn Jones and Garth Welch, whose partnership began in the Borovansky Ballet; and even Boro himself dancing the role of the Shopkeeper in

*La Boutique fantasque*, a role he inherited from Anna Pavlova's teacher, Enrico Cecchetti. Other productions featured in *Boro's Ballet* include *Nutcracker*, the popular classic that was a mainstay of Boro's Christmas seasons for many years. Black and white footage of *Nutcracker's* famous Snowflakes scene sits beside Walter Stringer's eye-catching colour photographs of the same moments. These combinations of moving and still images highlight

the theatricality and attractiveness of Boro's achievements.

But while Boro's activities onstage were powerful and appealing, off-stage drama was a constant feature of his directorship. He was a tempestuous man. His trump card as a ballet director came in 1957 when he succeeded in enticing Margot Fonteyn and her Royal Ballet partner Michael Somes to Australia, and *Boro's Ballet* includes newsreel and home movie footage of these two outstanding artists performing with the Borovansky Ballet. Letters in the Ingram Collection, however, suggest that not everything ran smoothly behind the scenes while Fonteyn was in town. Boro was unhappy with



Marilyn Jones and Garth Welch in Nutcracker, Borovansky Ballet c.1960  
 Photographer: Eric Smith  
 Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet  
 Pictorial Collection P348/AB/19

*Boro's Ballet: The Making of an Australian Ballet, 1939-1961*

Video slick courtesy of ScreenSound Australia and National Library of Australia

what he felt was Fonteyn's poor treatment of him. Not only did she, to his displeasure, apparently leave behind an album of photographs he gave her as a gift but, according to Boro, she also spoke in an unpleasant manner about him behind his back. After her departure he wrote:

I am very pleased that Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes have gone. They created quite a lot of uneasiness in my company because my people are not used to hearing derogatory remarks about the man who created ballet in Australia.

And shortly afterwards there was an altercation, again documented in the Ingram Collection, with Robert Pomié, a French dancer in the company who was as tempestuous as Boro. In a rage when the opening performance of his newly

choreographed ballet, *Serenade classique*, did not go according to plan, Pomié allegedly assaulted Boro. Boro dismissed him, vowing never to take him back. Equity was called in to arbitrate and Boro later relented. Pomié was a good dancer and was, moreover, married to Kathleen Gorham, one of Boro's most illustrious dancers.

*Boro's Ballet* gives a fascinating insight into the triumphs and the turbulence of the Borovansky years. Created around rare and remarkable collection items across a variety of media, it builds on the success of the first video produced jointly by the National Library and ScreenSound. This earlier video, *An Avalanche of Dancing: The Ballets Russes in Australia*, traces the mutual fascination between the Australian public and the artists of the Ballets Russes companies who toured here between 1936 and 1940, Boro's

colleagues. *Boro's Ballet* continues the story.

But the last word really belongs to Boro himself. During research for the production of *Boro's Ballet*, a series of radio interviews was discovered in the ScreenSound vaults. Produced in Adelaide during the late 1940s and early 1950s and recorded by Ron Sullivan for a radio program called *Theatre Magazine*, a number of the interviews were with Boro. In one of those interviews he proudly says: 'This company is mine. But I must say I am very proud of them and I can compare them with the most excellent companies in the world.' *Boro's Ballet* gives viewers an opportunity to discover just what Boro meant.

MICHELLE POTTER co-researched, scripted and produced *Boro's Ballet* (available from the NLA shop) and is the author of the National Library of Australia publication, *A Passion for Dance*.

The oral history tapes used as source material in this article are: Eric Clapham, 1992, TRC 2818 and Laurel Martyn, 1989, TRC 2444