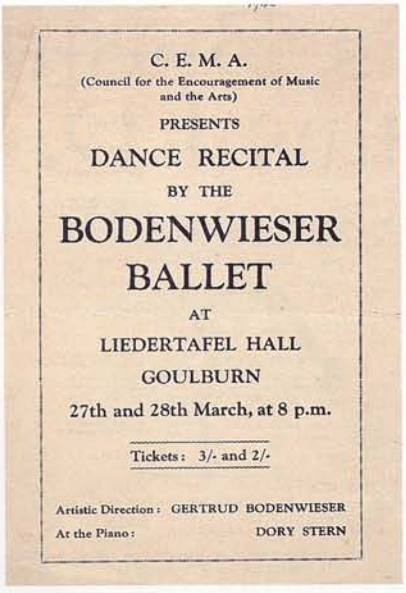
This Beautiful Cultural Desert

Blue Danube Waltz, 1940
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

Michelle Potter finds a rich tapestry in the life of an Australian modern dance pioneer

Gertrud Bodenwieser and her modern expressive dance company, the Bodenwieser Ballet, performed for pearl divers in Broome and for miners in Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie and Broken Hill. They danced in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Tasmania. Their Arts Council tours to country towns in New South Wales attracted large audiences of schoolchildren by day and adults by night, from Armidale to Wagga Wagga. As part of the civilian contribution during World War II, the Bodenwieser Ballet performed for a wide variety of charities including the Red Cross, the New South Wales Ambulance


C. E. M. A.
(Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts)
PRESENTS
DANCE RECITAL
BY THE
BODENWIESER BALLET
AT
LIEDERTAFEL HALL
GOULBURN
27th and 28th March, at 8 p.m.
Tickets: 3/- and 2/-
Artistic Direction: GERTRUD BODENWIESER
At the Piano: DORY STERN

(far left) Cover of Japanese Tour program, 1934, (translation: Bodenwieser Dance Group, Vienna)
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
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(left) Advertisement for a performance at Goulburn, New South Wales, 1946
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

(below) Gertrud Bodenwieser in the 1930s
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
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Fund, the Red Army and the Czechoslovakian Fighting Forces in France, sharing the stage on this latter occasion with ballet dancers from Colonel de Basil's Original Ballet Russe.

Bodenwieser pioneered lunchtime concerts in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide where her company staged 40-minute programs catering to workers in nearby offices and shops. Bodenwieser's dancers performed for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute, the Children's Library Movement, the Workers' Educational Association and an assortment of other organisations. Dance was Bodenwieser's life and passion. Between 1939, when she arrived in Australia as a refugee from her home city of Vienna, and 1959, when she died in Sydney, 'Bodie' and her company had danced across Australia in almost every imaginable situation.

The National Library of Australia recently acquired the Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives, an extensive collection of papers, photographs, musical scores, correspondence, clippings, posters, programs and drawings documenting Bodenwieser's life and career. The collection traces the artistic, social and political background of this remarkable woman. It reveals the dramas and crises that befell her and those close to her. It highlights her early tours across Europe and Asia as well as the long and gruelling South American adventure that allowed Bodenwieser to escape the rise of Nazism in Europe, and that eventually brought her to Australia. And it completes the story with material that documents the highs and lows of Bodenwieser's efforts to establish herself in Australia, the country she so often referred to as 'this beautiful cultural desert'.

Gertrud Bodenwieser, modern dance pioneer, was born in 1890 and grew up in the cultivated world of early twentieth-century Viennese society. She mixed with artists and writers, composers and theatre directors—Thomas Mann, Frank Wedekind, Max Reinhardt, Fritz Kreisler, Wassily Kandinsky and Sigmund Freud were among her colleagues, mentors and collaborative partners. The nature of her own dance training is unclear, but she was attracted to the work of Central European choreographers, dancers and teachers who, dissatisfied with the kind of dance that seemed nothing more than a frivolous form of entertainment, looked for a new movement vocabulary that could express emotions in a way that they felt was beyond the scope of existing dance forms. She made her debut as a performer in 1919 to an invited audience assembled at the premises of a Viennese association for painters, graphic artists and sculptors. Not long afterwards she established a school that quickly attracted an international student body and by 1926 she was Professor of Dance and Choreography at the Vienna State Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser, the company Bodenwieser formed as a vehicle for her choreography, toured

extensively, taking the new dance across Europe, into Asia and to the Americas.

Many of the works that Bodenwieser choreographed made strong social statements. *The Demon Machine*, first made in Vienna in the 1920s and revived countless times across the world, considered the effects of the machine age on the human soul, and *The Masks of Lucifer*, prophetically made in 1936 and also revived many times, presented the figure of Lucifer in the guises of Intrigue, Terror and Hate, inciting society to self-destruction. Many of her other works are in a lighter vein. *Blue Danube Waltz* was a staple item in her company's repertoire, and *Slavonic Dance* and *Czech Harvest Dance* took European folk-dance forms as inspiration. Still others, such as *Dance with the Golden Discs*, are formal exercises in choreographic structure.

With her strong Jewish connections, however, Bodenwieser was unable to withstand Hitler's onslaught in Austria in the late 1930s, and in 1938 set off with her company for Colombia, South America. There, under the name Ballet Vienesa, the company performed at the 400th anniversary celebrations of the Colombian capital, Bogota. The three-month engagement stretched into many months, however, and Bodenwieser found herself choreographing new works, often with strong South American overtones, and teaching South American children. But she was eventually convinced to move on, and to establish her new dance in a new environment. After initially beginning work in Wellington, New Zealand, Bodenwieser arrived in Sydney in August 1939.

Sydney was Bodenwieser's home for the next 20 years. At her studio in Pitt Street, in the centre of the city, she trained Australian dancers, male and female, who eventually formed the nucleus of her Australian company. But Australia in the 1940s and 1950s was a long way removed from pre-war Vienna, and Bodenwieser's efforts to come to grips, choreographically, with her new situation were often awkward. She made a number of works with Australian themes including two danced versions of *Waltzing Matilda*, the second with designs by Cedric Flower and a score by Werner Baer, and a series of works to music by Camille Gheysens—*Central Australian Suite*, *Aboriginal Spear Dance* and *Blue Mountains Waltz*. Film exists of the works choreographed to the Gheysens music, and this footage suggests that Bodenwieser's European background and career were still strong motivating forces. *Blue Mountains Waltz* looks decidedly Viennese and *Aboriginal Spear Dance* was adapted from *Japanese Spear Dance*, a piece Bodenwieser had made for herself in 1934 after a company tour to Japan. Only the trilogy *Central Australian Suite* has features that allow it to be seriously considered within a wider Australian cultural context. The trilogy's opening dance 'Solitude' expresses the loneliness and isolation associated with life in the Australian outback, and it recalls the paintings Russell Drysdale was making in the 1940s and 1950s, of solitary, monumental figures in a harsh, unforgiving landscape. The autobiographical overtones in

Postcard, 1919, after a portrait of Gertrud Bodenwieser by Franz von Bayros
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

(right) Group portrait on the Japanese Tour, 1934 (Gertrud Bodenwieser third from the left at rear, with leading Kabuki actors Kikugoro and Baiko)
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

(below right) On the New Zealand Tour, 1950
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

(below) Advertisement for a memorial performance sponsored by the Arts Council of Australia, c.1960
Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives (MS 9263)
From the Manuscript Collection

'Solitude' also seem clear. Bodenwieser was a remarkable woman and a remarkable artist, but one for whom Australia was often a very lonely and alienating place.

The Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives were assembled by Emmy Taussig, former Bodenwieser dancer and teacher, and Marie Cuckson, whose family supported Bodenwieser's Australian activities over many years. The support of Marie and her husband Eric Cuckson included engaging Bodenwieser and her dancers to perform for Eric's employees in his zipper factory in St Mary's, an outer western suburb of Sydney, and to teach dance to the children of those employees. The Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives were donated to the National Library by the Cuckson family as part of the Keep Dancing! project, an Australia Council–funded partnership initiative between the National Library, the National Film and Sound Archive and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance) designed to locate and make accessible the work of selected choreographers who have made a significant contribution to dance in Australia.

The vital paper-based records that comprise the Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives complement a number of oral history interviews recorded by the National Library with former Bodenwieser dancers, some of which were recorded specifically for the Keep Dancing! project. Keith Bain, Hanny Exiner, Coralie Hinkley and Shona Dunlop MacTavish are among those recorded. All danced extensively in Australia with the Bodenwieser Ballet, and all speak at length about their associations with the company and its leader. The Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives also lend added meaning to rare film and video footage of Bodenwieser's dances housed at the National Film and Sound Archive. A significant number of these recordings were also donated to the Keep Dancing! project by the Cuckson family, and a number of them were filmed by Eric Cuckson.

The Bodenwieser material in its various formats is part of the Australian Dance Collection, a significant and growing research archive of dance material held by major Australian collecting institutions, with particular strengths in the collections of the National Library and the National Film and Sound Archive. Items in the collection are currently being linked in an electronic directory which may be accessed via the National Library's World Wide Web site at: http://www.nla.gov.au/ausdance/.

MICHELLE POTTER manages the Keep Dancing! project at the National Film and Sound Archive. She is the author of the National Library of Australia publication *A Passion for Dance*