

dance people *dance*

Exhibition curator Michelle Potter says there is more to dance than the moment of its performance: the artefacts of dance inform our history and cultural development

Dance is a fleeting art. The moment of its performance is the moment of its disappearance. For years a whole host of people, from dance practitioners to dance scholars, have debated the issue of the ephemerality of dance. How can we ever capture the dance when no one performance is ever the same? Do video and film give us just one person's view of one evening's performance? And so on, and so on.

Sometimes this debate seems like a huge cliché, sometimes like an academic exercise. Sometimes it seems like an excuse to avoid making decisions about archiving dance material, sometimes like a device that allows the continued marginalisation of dance as a serious art form. And, having spent several months working in the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library, I know that collections of dance material are not and do not have to be dry-as-dust kind of arrangements. The New York Public Library's Dance Collection is used by young and old alike, and not just New Yorkers either! It is an exciting and vibrant resource and the dance community, both American and

quite amazing dance material in this national institution. Even in 1989 it seemed to be crying out to be assembled into an exhibition.

Since 1989 the National Library's dance material has grown and blossomed. It is still not part of a named, discrete collection like my New York model, but it is an enviable collection unequalled anywhere else in Australia in its scope and in the variety of media through which Australian dance is represented. The dance material includes not only books and magazines, the conventional items we associate with libraries. In fact, the strengths of the National Library's dance material are not even in printed material but in a



(above) Arthur Grunenberg
Anna Pavlova in *Egyptian Dance*, 1920
Number 12 in a series of 12 lithographs
Reproduced from *Anna Pavlova: Eine Folge von 12 Originallithographien nach dem Leben*
Gezeichnet by Arthur Grunenberg with an introduction by Albert Giesecke
(Berlin: Wiese & Co., 1977)



(right) J. Redaway & Sons
Corroboree or Native Festival c.1855
after William Blandowski (1822–c.1878)
aquatint engraving; 22.7 x 29 cm
Reproduced from 'Australia Terra Cognita'
(unpublished manuscript, c.1855)
Rex Nan Kivell Collection; from the Pictorial
Collection

international, proudly claims it and accepts it as a natural extension of dance performance.

So when the opportunity arose to curate a major travelling exhibition using the dance material in the National Library of Australia, I jumped at the opportunity. In fact, it was something I had been thinking about since 1989 when, while working at the National Library as its Esso Research Fellow in the Performing Arts, I first came to realise that there was some

host of unique items such as oral histories, photographs and art works, manuscript items including letters, clipping books and diaries, and assorted ephemera such as programs, posters and handbills.

What really attracted me to the idea of a National Library exhibition devoted to dance was the broad scope of the material at hand. I really didn't want to do a show that was nothing more than a collection of pretty photographs hanging like devotional



items on a wall, with perhaps a signed pointe shoe thrown in for good measure. I wanted to do an exhibition that would pose questions, suggest ideas about Australian dance that perhaps hadn't occurred to some people before. I didn't want a show about memorabilia but one about issues. I imagined an exhibition that would situate dance in a broad context, one that would be accessible, and that might also help to give dance something of a serious profile in the eyes of the general public.

Dance People Dance was born in early 1996. The exhibition is not an exhaustive overview of the history of Australian dance, although it does cover the period from the 1920s to the present. On display are about 200 items from across the range of the National Library's dance collection along with some items, such as stage costumes, borrowed from private collectors and from institutional lenders, the Australian Ballet, the National Museum of Australia and the Sydney Opera House Trust. These loan items complement

material from the Library's own collection.

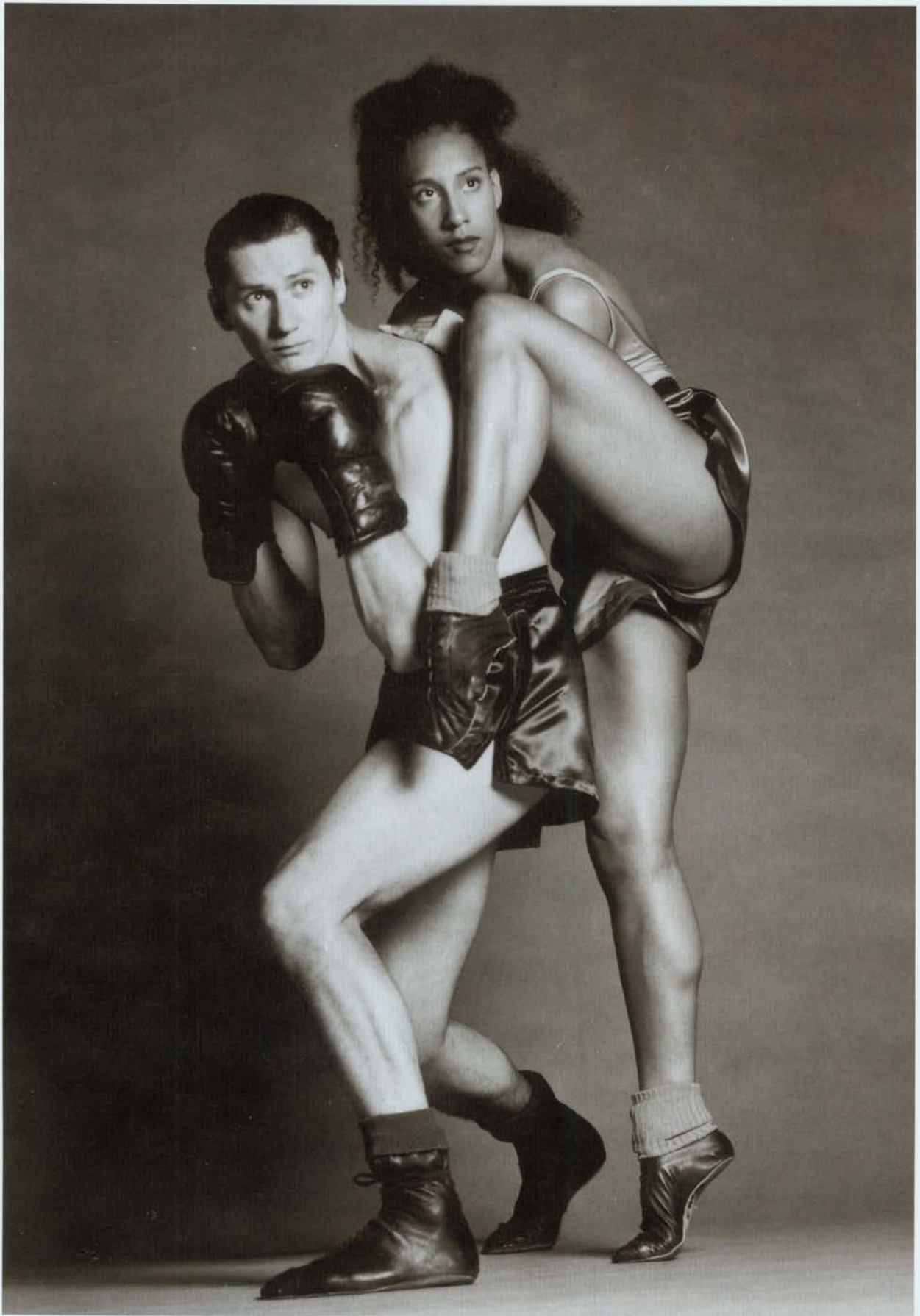
As the title suggests, the exhibition focuses on people—people who dance and have danced in Australia, people whose contribution to Australian dance has been significant, and whose careers reflect attitudes and values that are distinctive and that show something of what it is to be Australian. Every dancer, every choreographer, every director represented in the National Library's dance collection—from Anna Pavlova to Paul Mercurio—has had, or continues to have, a career that suggests a multitude of ways of looking at this country's cultural history.

Tradition, innovation, impact, growth and change surface as ideas to be pondered upon in *Dance People Dance*. So, too, do expressions of the migrant experience and questions concerning the theatricalisation of Aboriginal dance. And these themes and ideas weave and criss-cross throughout the exhibition. The migrant experience, for example, does



(top) Artist William Constable works on a set design for the Borovansky Ballet's *Terra Australis*, c.1946
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet; from the Pictorial Collection

(above) Tamara Tchinarova in rehearsal with Edouard Borovansky, 1946
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet; from the Pictorial Collection



Black and Blue, Sydney Dance Company, 1994
Photograph by Branco Gaica
Sydney Dance Company Collection
From the Pictorial Collection

not end with the story of Edouard Borovansky, Gertrud Bodenwieser and other European dance exiles who made careers in Australia beginning in the 1940s. It resurfaces in the development of ethnic dance as a theatrical genre, and again in the Graeme Murphy–Kristian Fredrikson 1992 version of *Nutcracker* made for the Australian Ballet.

White perceptions of Aboriginality and Aboriginal attitudes to dance also become part of the story as a result of my decision to display one of the National Library's treasured items—John Antill's manuscript score for the ballet *Corroboree*. With a range of material on show including costumes, costume designs, film, photographs, programs and oral history excerpts, the section of the exhibition that grew from the *Corroboree* score is perhaps the most interesting, both visually and aurally. But it also opens up a gamut of hotly contested issues about

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the ownership of cultural traditions. And what exactly is a corroboree in the 1990s anyway?

I tried to avoid the temptation to cram in as much as possible, and curated the exhibition around certain key items and collections. Those key items include, in addition to the Antill score, a number of photographic collections. Photographs taken by Max Dupain between 1936 and the early 1940s show the stars of the Russian Ballet companies that toured Australia to huge acclaim between 1936 and 1940. The Dupain collection is so alluring that it is easy to understand the impact these dancers had in Australia. From the

current decade, the work of Régis Lansac for Meryl Tankard emphasises how the visual contributions of artists such as Lansac are able to extend the horizons of dance. Other recent photographic material records particular works or tours: Martyr Sohl's stunning shots documenting Stanton Welch's *Corroboree* performed in San Francisco in 1995 by the Australian Ballet, for example, and Stephen Smith's impressive work that records a tour to Paris in 1983 by a group of Aboriginal dancers from the Northern Territory.

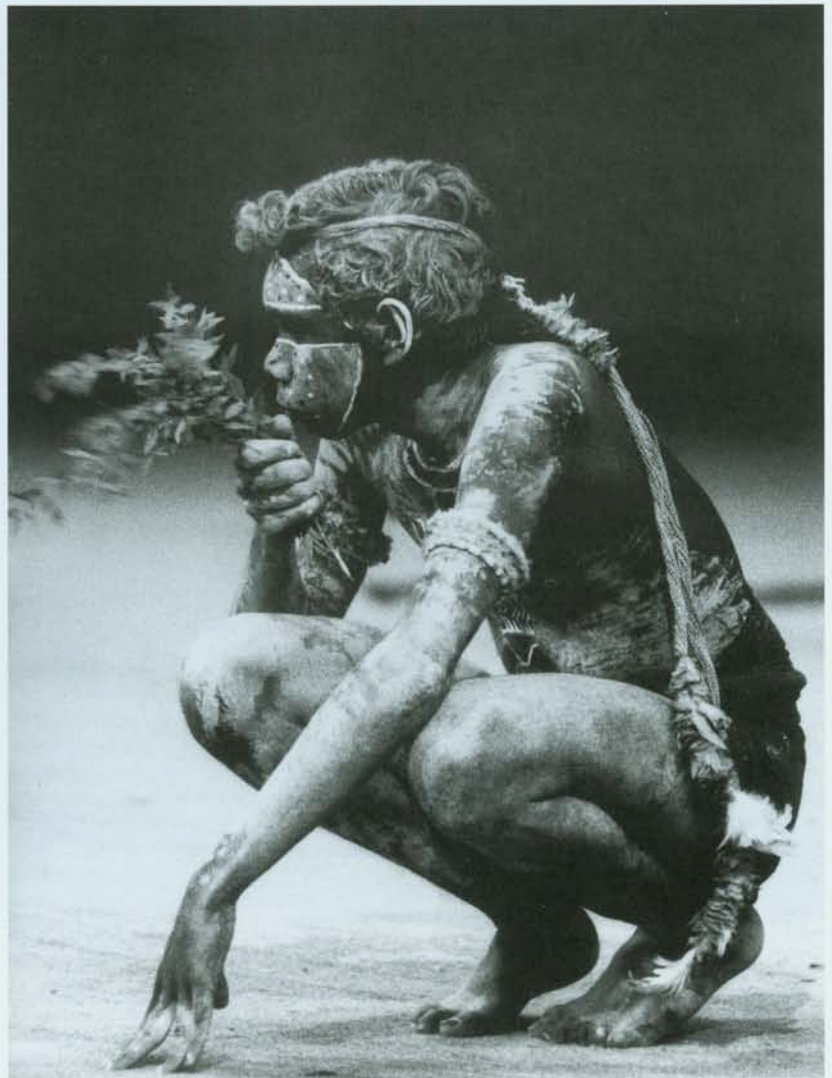
Excerpts from oral history interviews add a particularly human dimension to the show. Kira Bousloff, who founded the West Australian Ballet in the 1950s, recalls standing on the wharf in Adelaide in 1939 watching her friends in the Covent Garden Russian Ballet leave for Europe at the end of their Australian tour. Tamara Tchinanova, who like

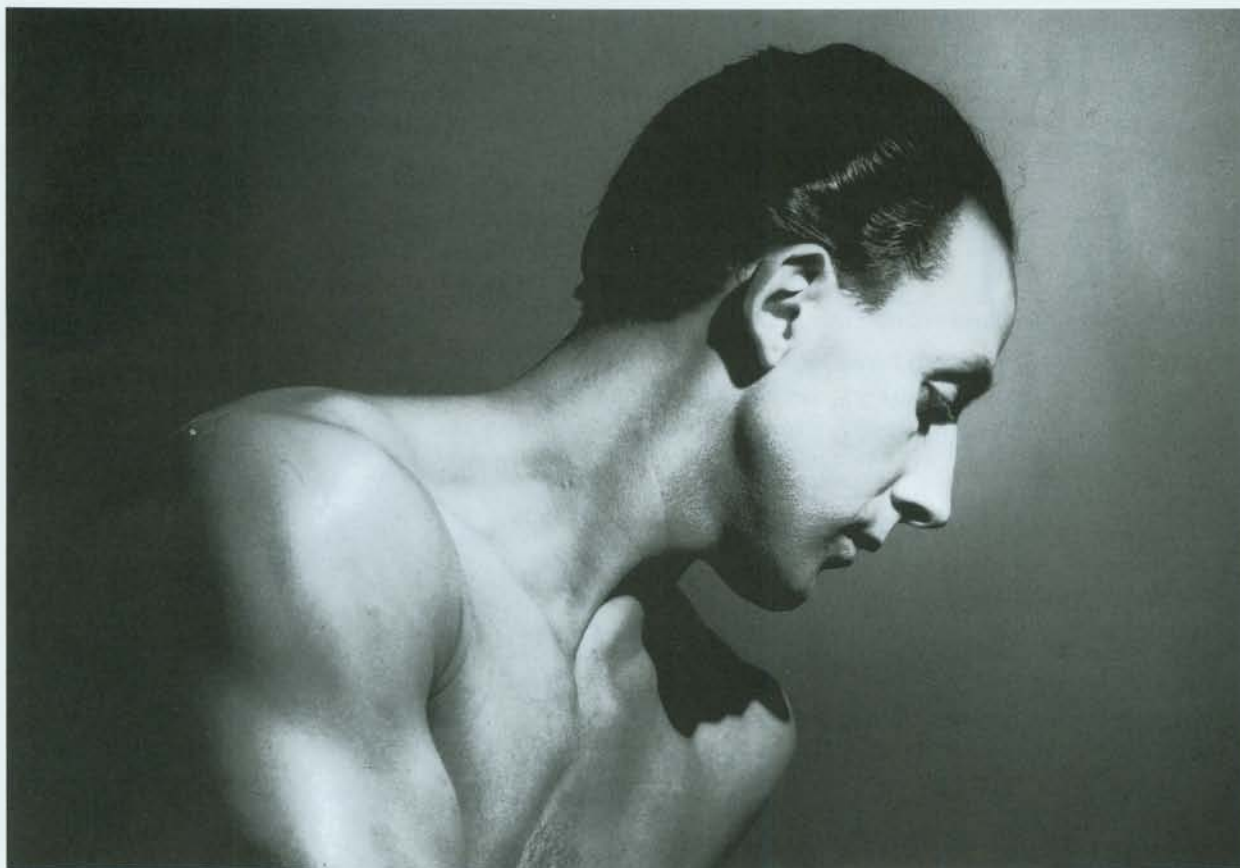


Souvenir program for Colonel W. de Basil's Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, c.1936, with artwork by Norman Lindsay
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet
Norman Lindsay's artwork reproduced with the permission of the Lindsay Estate

(right) *The Kangaroo* performed at the Festival d'Automne, Paris, 1983
Photograph by Stephen Smith
From the Pictorial Collection

(opposite) Paul Petroff, Ballets Russes, Australian tour, c.1938
Photograph by Max Dupain
From the Pictorial Collection





Bousloff also came to Australia with the Russian Ballet and who also stayed in 1939 and went on to dance with the Kirsova Ballet and the Borovansky Ballet, speaks about working for Borovansky. What was he really like as a boss? As difficult as we are often led to believe? And the three choreographers, Rex Reid, Beth Dean and Stanton Welch, who have used Antill's *Corroboree* as the basis for a ballet, all speak about aspects of the work they made to this piece of music.

The Library's Oral History Collection has fascinated me for some time now. Using it in *Dance People Dance* reminds me again of the uniqueness of oral history as source material. The voice of Rex Reid, for example, recalling the opening night of his *Corroboree* in 1950 gives a flavour to the exhibition not obtainable from any other source. I have dipped into more of the oral history interviews in the Library's Oral History Collection in a slightly different way in a book 'A Passion for Dance', to be published in June. 'A Passion for Dance' contains edited interviews with ten artists—choreographers and artistic directors

of dance companies—who have shaped the direction of Australian dance in the 1990s.

Dance is a fleeting art. No performance is ever the same. We all have our memories of performances that have left us moved beyond words, performances whose emotional impact can never be captured. I will never forget seeing Rudolf Nureyev step onto the stage to begin the male solo in *Le Corsaire*, or a performance of *Giselle* decades ago by the Borovansky Ballet in which Garth Welch pulled out all stops as Albrecht. And there was a recent performance by the Australian Ballet of *La Sylphide* in which principal dancer Miranda Coney and Danish guest artist Alexander Koelpin made me feel so lucky to be in the theatre on that night. I love the unpredictable quality that dance has. It's a quality that is born out of its ephemerality and out of the fact that it's a living, breathing art form.

But dance has a capacity, just like any other art form, to reveal more than what we see on the stage during those fleeting moments. *Dance People Dance* celebrates a rich and diverse national collection. It suggests that

what remains after a performance, the items that institutions collect, have a value that is often underestimated. The traces that remain after the performance—the photographs, the films, the documents, the recollections—may not be the performance but they do tell us much about ourselves. They show that dance reflects our social and cultural values, mirrors how we build our identity, and reveals much of what it is to be Australian.

Dance People Dance opens at the National Library Gallery on 28 April 1997. Its opening coincides with Dance Week. The exhibition will be in Canberra at the National Library of Australia until October 1997, after which it goes on tour to various venues in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. The tour, made possible by Visions of Australia, will travel until 1999.

MICHELLE POTTER, whose involvement in Australian dance encompasses performance, teaching and writing, is the founder and editor of the dance journal *Brolga*